



# WHAT MATTERS TO YOUNG AUSTRALIANS?

EXPLORING YOUNG PEOPLE'S  
PERSPECTIVES FROM 2010–2018



A Whitlam Institute  
'Future of Australian Democracy –  
Young People and Democracy'  
Research Project

Philippa Collin and Sky Hugman

November 2020



# About the Whitlam Institute

The Whitlam Institute is building a nationally significant institution delivering distinctive, bold and inspiring policy research and programs that promote common ground, inclusive national identity and civic engagement for all Australians. We seek to be recognised across the political spectrum as delivering a nation-building agenda.

"...help the great and continuing work of building a more equal, open, tolerant and independent Australia."

*Gough Whitlam 2010*

For more information about the Whitlam Institute, please visit our website [whitlam.org](http://whitlam.org)

## About the Authors



### **Associate Professor Philippa Collin**

**Principal Research Fellow, Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University**

Philippa Collin co-directs the WSU Young and Resilient Research Centre and the Intergener8 Living Lab and is a co-Stream Leader for the Wellbeing, Health and Youth NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence (2017 – 2022). A social scientist, Philippa studies new forms of political participation, identity and governance as they relate to the dynamics of elitism and exclusion – particularly for young people. She also studies the role of the digital in the social, cultural and political lives of young people, with a focus on the implications for health and wellbeing.



### **Dr Sky Hugman**

**Managing Editor, Australian Journal of Sociology**

As a researcher who works across disciplines, Sky is interested in questions about *who* produces knowledge, *what* knowledge is and *how* knowledge is produced – together. Her most recent projects focus on power, affect and epistemological assumptions in the creation of knowledge. These projects emphasise the role of reflexivity, resistance and the imaginary in the generation of alternative knowledge production spaces. Other interests include network representation and theory, and the use of natural language mapping software for text analytics and network analysis. Sky also has extensive research experience with young people, sexuality and gender equity issues.

Cover photo by Jay Wennington on Unsplash

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the contribution of Leanne Smith to the design of this project and her commitment to advancing the rights of children and young people in Australia. We are extremely grateful for Associate Professor Rachel Hendry for her advice and guidance on the methodology and specifically different strategies for using text mining to analyse the *What Matters?* collection. This was no easy task and many techniques had to be trialled in an effort to extract insights from the diverse ways young people write and express their ideas. Western Sydney University Summer Intern, Rachel Rae, helped advance the project through initial interview analysis and experimentation with topic analysis. We are also indebted to Whitlam Institute staff who assisted with various administrative aspects from coordinating recruitment for interviews to digitisation of the corpus and publication of this report. We also thank Dr Nukte Ogun who provided editorial advice on the final report.

A digital copy of this document is available online at [whitlam.org](http://whitlam.org)

ISBN: 978-1-74108-518-1

DOI: 10.26183/j8d0-r303 (<https://doi.org/10.26183/j8d0-r303>)

Suggested citation: Collin, P. and Hugman, S. (2020) *What Matters to Young Australians? Exploring young people's perspectives 2010-2018*. Whitlam Institute, Sydney.

Copyright: The Whitlam Institute within Western Sydney University 2020.

# Table of contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>About <i>What Matters?</i></b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Methodology and Methods</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Findings</b>	<b>12</b>
<i>What Matters?</i> Key themes young people write about	12
What do young people mean when they write about ' <i>What Matters?</i> '	22
Gender and <i>What Matters?</i> 2018 Snapshot	26
In their own words: writing for change	29
<b>Discussion – Young people's perspectives through their writing on <i>What Matters?</i></b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>38</b>



# Foreword



My son is six. He had only just started kindergarten when the Coronavirus, a new word in his vocabulary, changed childhood as he knows it. He, like all kids around the world, doesn't understand what is happening – why he can't see Grandma and Granddad? I am sure that my husband and I are not the only ones who have stayed up late wondering what kind of world we have brought our child into, what challenges he will have to face that we never did, and whether we are at all capable of preparing him for what is coming in a world where climate change, shifting geopolitics, growing inequality, resource scarcity and threats to our environment and way of life mount every day.

Kids have questions, and kids have views about all of this – we have to find age-appropriate ways to help them grapple with complex issues that are getting harder and harder to protect them from – they are seeing the results – and to let them express themselves about how it makes them feel.

The Whitlam Institute's '*What Matters?*' writing competition is one avenue we can use to encourage our young people to speak up about what's on their minds and give those voices a platform to be heard. We have been listening to them since 2004. The breadth and depth of their responses over time has been breathtaking. In recent years they have raised their concerns about everything from domestic violence to playground access, climate change and the natural environment to sexual abuse, loneliness and depression to drought.

This research report draws upon this rich archive of young Australian writing. The goal is to understand young people's perspectives, identify how these are persisting or changing over time and explain what motivates and informs the civic and political practices of Australian young people today.

**If we want our children to have a stake in our democracy and our society, we have to treat them as valued citizens and engage with their concerns. Not because of the leaders they might one day be, in our own projection of what that means, but recognising their legitimacy and leadership as it stands today.**

We hope this research emboldens our collective efforts to engage children – whether that is by creating a nationally agreed core curriculum on civics and citizenship, establishing a mechanism for a youth voice to parliament or by lowering the voting age – it's time to bring them into the conversation about their future and Australia's place in the world.

**Leanne Smith**  
**Director, Whitlam Institute  
within Western Sydney University**

# Executive Summary

*At a time where Australian democracy is under significant pressure, it is more important than ever to understand young people's views on social and political issues – and consider what they mean for governance and public policy. Since 2004, the Whitlam Institute within Western Sydney University has run a writing competition for Australian students posing the question **What Matters?** Since it began, more than 30,000 entries have been received. The Whitlam Institute has commissioned the authors to analyse writing submitted between 2010 – 2018. The aim of this work is to understand what young people are concerned with, how they conceptualise different issues, if and how those issues and concerns are changing over time, and what they reveal about the contemporary politics of young people.*

This report presents findings from the first ever analysis of 27,814 *What Matters?* essays using a combination of text mining and manual thematic and discourse analysis.

To complement the analysis of the corpus we also conducted interviews with 12 competition finalists to better contextualise and understand why entrants write about particular topics, what forms of action and agents they identify as capable of achieving change. Our analysis finds that:

- **Competition entries have a distinctly political character.** When asked 'What Matters?' entrants grapple with salient questions of what it means to be human, to be part of a community and to live well in the world. Young people write about problems, as well as the aspects of human societies and the natural world in which they take delight. They discuss the values, behaviours, social arrangements and the different life forms and ecologies that shape their views.
  - **There are clear patterns in what matters to students as they get older and how these have changed over the years of the competition.** Younger students write about topics that are relevant to their direct experience or community. Older year groups more often write about topical issues connected to current affairs. Over time, there are noticeable increases in students writing about human rights, issues of social justice (poverty, discrimination), the environment and climate change.
  - **Young people mainly write about social and relational themes of people, life and the world.** Young people have addressed a very wide range of topics and issues relating to these clear themes each year and over time. Entrants address how people relate to one another in families, friendship groups, across national borders and the values and rights that should underpin how we treat one another.
  - **Young people write about local and global topics – specifically in relation to making the world a better place.** Environment and Australia are two of the most common themes across all age groups and years of the competition. Over time, more essays address issues for the environment, global warming, pollution and climate change and Australia's role to address these problems.
  - **Young people write about Australia as a nation, as a people and as a country in relation to other parts of the globe.** Entrants are concerned about what Australia stands for, its future position in the world, and the need for Australia to take leadership on environmental, economic and humanitarian challenges. They discuss the Australian government and its responsibilities to Australians, and other people and countries.
- **Entries identify diverse actors seen as important to the way society is governed.** They explore different governing styles and the role of different actors (young people, celebrities, politicians) and institutions such as the Government and the United Nations.
  - **Essays emphasise ideas of care and the actions that demonstrate or deliver care.** Young people imagine the future in terms of better care for people and things through individual actions and government policy. They often write from a rights-based perspective – human, children's, women's and Aboriginal rights are prominent concerns.

Despite contemporary commentary, the analysis reveals that young people's politics are not driven by 'single issues' but by the interconnections and dependencies young people see between different issues. They express a politics of care and justice, that is informed by 'evidence' and aimed at making a better Australia and a better world.

The essays reveal young people are engaging with ideas about what makes for a good society, what kind of civic and political actions, communities and institutions they believe should support this – and what role they should play as individuals and as young people. The analysis shows that young people are an untapped resource for Australian democracy – not for what they will become as adults, but because of their concerns and ideas on social issues and how they can be addressed right now.

Their writings also indicate that the civic norms and political values held by many Australian young people are not yet reflected in mainstream political cultures or current institutions and processes of democracy. In their writing young people reflect participatory, deliberative and reflexive norms and the hope for a form of democracy that can be intergenerational.

This research was inspired by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: that young people should be involved in decisions that affect them. We were interested in how we might enhance ways of hearing – or reading – what young people have to say when they 'speak' from their own contexts and communities.

Ultimately what we find is that young people themselves are calling for this through the writing they submit to the *What Matters?* competition. In this spirit, we offer the following recommendations arising from this research:

**Recommendation 1.** That political parties, politicians and policy professionals enhance processes for hearing and responding to children and young people's perspectives in Australian democracy, such as creating a direct youth voice to parliament.

**Recommendation 2.** All decision makers and educators should adopt a rights-based approach in line with Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child that recognises and values young people's participation in democratic processes and acknowledges that care for others is central to young people's political concerns.

**Recommendation 3.** Educators should consider how classroom teaching and school student leadership programs contribute to gendered ideas about who should participate and what issues should matter to young people.

**Recommendation 4.** As a matter of priority, civil society organisations, political parties, educators and policy makers should develop participatory, deliberative, and intergenerational approaches to democratic engagement, civics education and policy making that are co-created with young people.

**Recommendation 5.** Researchers and those who commission research must work directly with young people to explore the value of research and the role it can play in amplifying youth voice and agency.



# Introduction

At a time where Australian democracy is – as in many parts of the world – at a crossroads, it is more important than ever to understand young people’s views on social and political issues and what this means for governance and public policy. As members of Australian society the views of children and young people matter for Australian democracy today, and into the future.

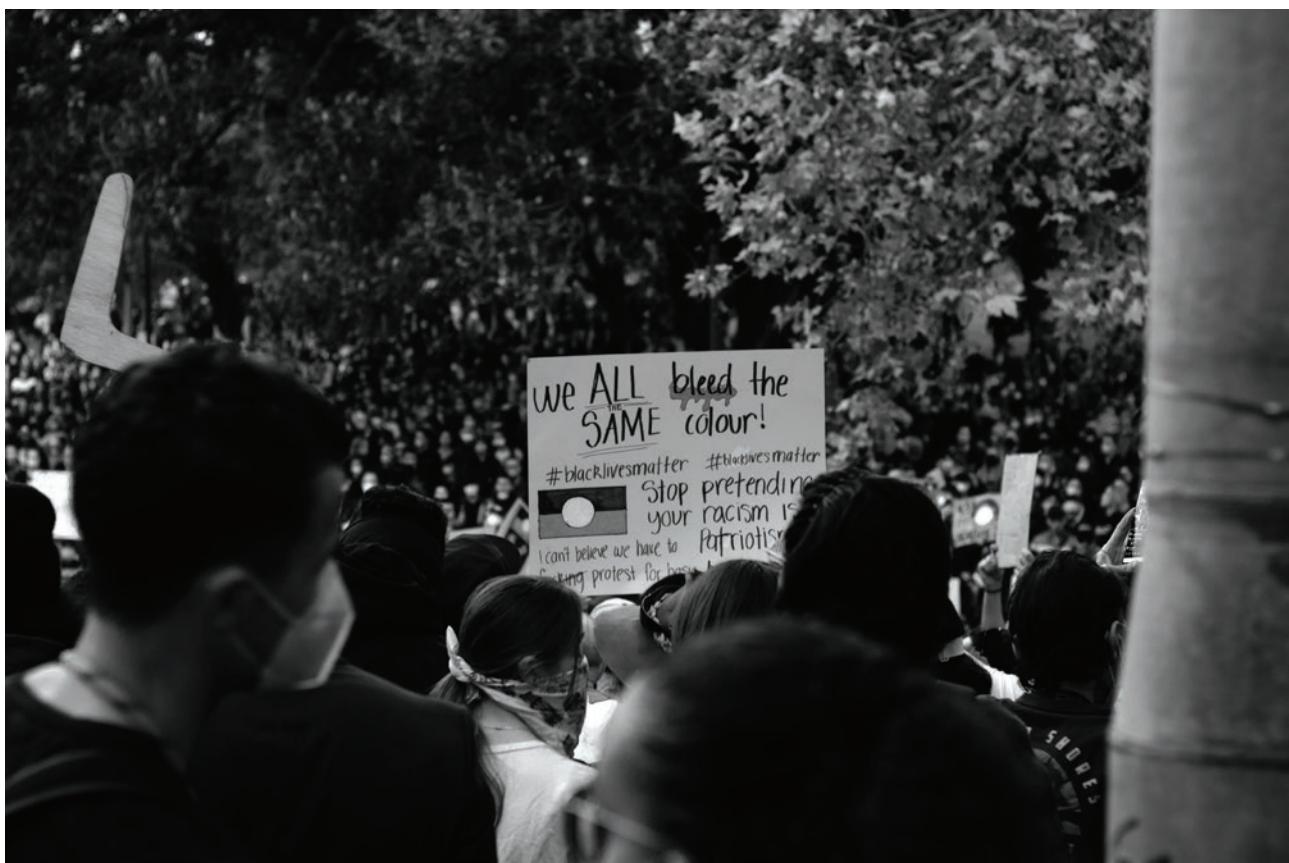
In 2004, the Whitlam Institute within Western Sydney University started a writing competition for Australian students. The competition poses the question *What Matters?*: providing a platform for young people to consider this question and share their views with a wider public. Since it began, more than 30,000 entries have been received. This rich archive represents a unique research opportunity to explore the issues that are important to these young Australians, how they make meaning of the different things that concern them and how the themes, topics and issues of import have changed over time. The collection itself is more than just an archive of a competition; it is a trove of the concerns and views of Australian young people over time.

Young people’s politics are under-researched and under-valued (Collin and McCormack, 2020). To understand the trajectory of contemporary citizenship norms and the implications these have for democracy, we need to understand what politics means to young people and how they make sense of different issues. This involves paying attention to who young people define as political actors, what forms of engagement they value, who they target with their political views and what

change they envisage for the world around them (Norris, 2002). Enhancing young people’s engagement in democracy involves hearing what young people are saying in forums where they feel empowered to share their perspectives.

In response, the Whitlam Institute commissioned a scoping paper and a literature review (Collin and McCormack, 2020) on youth civic and political participation, and the first ever systematic analysis of the *What Matters* essays submitted between 2010 and 2018<sup>1</sup>. The goal of the *What Matters* research is to understand young people’s perspectives, identify how these are persisting or changing over time and explain what motivates and informs the civic and political practices of Australian young people today. We have also considered if the topics that matter to young people reflect or contrast with mainstream political and policy debate. Are certain topics becoming more prominent over time and what do young people want to see happen in relation to key issues or problems? Who do young people identify as important in these debates and what complex relations are being highlighted in the way young people talk about their world? Finally, we have considered the implications of young people’s perspectives for Australian democracy, more broadly, in our increasingly interconnected world.

Overall, we hope this engagement with young people’s concerns informs popular debate, civics education programs, and encourages more inclusive policy processes and strategies to build trust in democracy among Australian young people – especially those, not yet old enough to vote.



<sup>1</sup> This project has ethics approval from Western Sydney University: H12951.

# About What Matters?

To enter the Whitlam Institute's *What Matters?* writing competition, students from years five to 12 submit an original written work between 400-600 words in prose or poetry, of either fiction or non-fiction that responds to the question: 'What Matters?'. Between 2010 and 2017 these were submitted in hard copy with a mix of handwritten and typed entries. In 2018 all entries were submitted digitally. The competition began in NSW and expanded sequentially to the ACT, Tasmania, Victoria, WA, Queensland, South Australia and the NT. Now any young person who is enrolled in a year category in an Australian school is eligible to enter the competition of their own volition, and online. Students can submit essays independently and many entries are created within a classroom setting. Teachers use the competition as a writing exercise to help students plan, draft, use persuasive arguments and publish their writing. From 2004 to today, the competition has generated a rich archive of the views of young Australians.

Each year, every participating student receives a certificate of participation. Qualified markers submit a long list to a panel of eminent judges who determine age group finalists for year-group and specific category awards. An annual awards ceremony for students and their families is hosted by the Patron (currently Lisa Wilkinson) is accompanied by a full day of workshops for students. The finalists' essays are widely published, creating platforms for exposure of the students' writing.

# Background

*Healthy and viable democracies need ongoing generational renewal at the local and national level (Pratchett, 1999). However, the engagement of younger – and older – citizens with traditional institutions of democracy (such as membership of political parties and volunteer organisations, electoral enrolment and contacting publicly elected representatives) has been in decline for several decades in Australia and around the world (Norris, 2002; 2003; Martin, 2012). This has been variously interpreted as young people becoming disengaged from politics (Pirie & Worcester, 2000), 'uncertain' about democracy and citizenship (Martin, 2012), 'alienated' (Marsh et al, 2007), 'disillusioned' (Hay, 2007) or adopting a 'choice-based politics' which favours new issue-based organisations and campaigns (Norris, 2003).*

Increasingly, research shows that when close attention is paid to how young people conceptualise politics and participation a change in citizenship norms is apparent and is manifest in "...a diversification in the agencies (the collective organisations structuring political activity), the repertoires (the actions commonly used for political expression), and the targets (the political actors that participants seek to influence)" (Norris, 2002: 215 – 216). This diversification is associated with new forms of political participation enabled by digital technologies (Bennett, 2003; Coleman and Rowe, 2005; Vromen, 2008), everyday and individualised or informal practices (Vromen 2008; Harris et al., 2010: 27; Collin, 2015) and political talk (Vromen et al 2015).



At the same time, there is no compelling evidence that the shift towards individualised, informal and issues-based political participation is cleaved from institutional political processes such as elections. Indeed, the 'downward trend' in institutional forms of participation is under new scrutiny as research finds young people have and will enrol and vote when parties, politicians and particular issues directly address their needs (McAlister & Snagovsky, 2018; Pickard 2017; Sloam & Henn 2019). In Australia, where young people have high enrolment rates relative to other democracies, pre-poll data indicates that they have a significant effect on ballot results (Brooker, 2011). Even in countries such as the UK where the youth vote is not large enough to determine elections, there are strong signs of generational differences when it comes to voting (Sloam and Henn, 2018). Furthermore, the specific social conditions and historical events young people experience have 'social generation' effects (Woodman and Wyn). These influence how young people relate to democracy and problematise the view that young people simply have no interest in politics, and have no political power or influence (Collin, 2015).

However, while young people in Australia are engaged with political and social issues from a young age, they do feel excluded from political decision making and a 2019 Report Card on Children's Rights in Australia found that many young people under the age of 18 feel they have no voice in society (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019). This partly explains why, over the last two decades, young people have tended towards an issues-based approach to politics, forms of political and civic participation that are flexible and action oriented, and where they feel they can make a direct contribution and see tangible results (Vromen, 2003; Harris et al, 2007; Collin, 2015). General declines in political parties or trade union membership do not mean that young Australians are disinterested in politics: in large numbers they are joiners

of community organisations, informal debates, and youth-led movements (Collin and McCormack, 2019). These forums tend to be flatter in terms of leadership and offer flexible options for young people to tailor their participation within collective actions to their individual preferences and needs. These preferences and needs are increasingly shaped by the media (Fyfe and Wyn 2007) and digital technology (Bennett, 2008; Vromen, 2012; Collin 2015) with the opportunities they provide for new forms of individualised and collective action, protest and dissent (Bessant, 2014; Manning, 2015; Vromen, 2016). More recently the role of social media and its use in election campaigns (including to young people under the age of 18) has been questioned as more young people learn about and respond to political messaging in an era where the provenance, placement of political advertisements and other content is highly opaque and unregulated (Notley and Dezuanni, 2019).

Nevertheless, the research shows that in order to understand contemporary citizenship norms and political identities we must understand in more depth what issues matter to young people, who young people define as political actors, what repertoires of engagement they value, who they target with their political views and what kinds of change they envisage (Collin, 2015). Moreover, if we are interested in enhancing young people's engagement in democracy, we should pay more attention to the places and ways in which they are already 'speaking' about issues of concern as "[i]nsisting that engagement can only be experienced through conventional, adult-centric forums (in which young people of this age group have little interest) misses an opportunity to create links between everyday and formal political spheres" (Harris et al. 2007: 24). New insights may also raise important questions about the forms of democratic governance and institutions that can effectively engage with young people and meet the needs and expectations of this cohort of citizens.



# Methodology and Methods

*This research used novel digital and qualitative analysis to examine the **What Matters?** entries submitted between 2010 – 2018, as well as in-depth interviews conducted with 12 competition finalists between October and December 2019. Due to the complexity of the data set, a mixture of research methods were used for analysis. These methods were developed iteratively over the life of the project as we learned more about the ways in which young people write and express their ideas and how these could be analysed in such a large corpus. Here we describe the data and the general approach to analysis.*

In each sub-section of the *Findings* below we briefly explain the specific methods used to ascertain: what main themes young people have written about over ten years and by year level and year of competition; what issues and topics they are concerned with and how; such as the environment; why young people write about the topics they do; what they are looking for and who they think should bring about

this change. Our analysis considers how themes and topics change over time and what can explain these changes.

## Data

Three different datasets were analysed. The first included 24,122 handwritten and typed essays submitted manually to the competition between 2010 – 2017. These were digitised and analysed along with a second data set of 3,692 digital entries, submitted in 2018 (Table 1).

**Table 1. Digitised *What Matters?* entries by year group and year of entry**

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
<b>Year 5-6</b>	586	493	697	609	675	1036	1117	1393	1053	7659
<b>Year 7-8</b>	607	504	1180	800	574	986	1328	1112	1053	8144
<b>Year 9-10</b>	1095	665	1431	1183	1064	1361	1031	1128	1279	10237
<b>Year 11-12</b>	207	136	213	147	199	145	225	195	307	1774
<b>Total</b>	2495	1798	3521	2739	2512	3528	3701	3828	3692	27814

While demographic information was difficult to extract from the digitised entries, all 2018 entries were electronically submitted providing easy access to variables such as gender, postcode, and essay title. Of the 2018 entries most entrants are female (65%) as a higher proportion of single sex girl schools than boy schools submit entries. Co-educational public schools deliver roughly equal numbers of entries from males and females. In 2018 more entries are uploaded by teachers (65%) than parents and guardians (35%) highlighting the key role of schools as an entry point for students to the *What Matters?* competition. In 2018 there was also a massive (500%) increase in the number of entries submitted by students themselves (outside of a schooling context) which suggest the online submission increases the accessibility and appeal of the competition for students. In 2018 most entries were submitted from New South Wales (all except 30 from the Australian Capital Territory) and most of those were from metropolitan postcodes, specifically Sydney (Appendix A).<sup>2</sup>

The third data set is 12 transcribed semi-structured interviews, completed by the research team in 2019 with *What Matters?* competition finalists from 2016 – 2019 (see Appendix B). Eight females and four males participated, aged from 11 to 18 years, from NSW and Tasmania.

## Analysis

**What Matters? essays:** First the full corpus was analysed for key themes. Secondly, the corpus was analysed in terms of the topics, issues and actions discussed. Analysis was conducted by year of entry and the class level groupings used to adjudicate the competition<sup>3</sup>. The thematic analysis helped identify broad themes but did not explain what authors meant when they used a term. For example, a text that uses the word *environment* might be discussing forests, animals, sustainability, or climate change – or it could be exploring ideas about the beauty, value or need to protect different *natural environments*. Alternatively, a text on the concept of *environment* might be discussing settings in which young people live such as home, online or the school environment. These are all different ideas which might mean different things to different people. A theme such as 'environment', therefore, is not a 'self-explanatory idea'. Instead it carries meaning through discourse – the associated meanings, beliefs and values it conveys. Therefore, the second stage analysis focused on extracting what young people wrote about within themes and with which concepts and discourses. This required devising, testing and evaluating different methods of analysis.

2 In 2018 there were around 300 entries from Tasmania however these have not been included in our analysis.

3 These are in two year-groupings: 5/6; 7/8; 9/10; 11/12.

The size and format of the data set was suitable for some automated analysis. We used Leximancer, a natural language mapping (text mining) program, to identify significant semantic and discursive patterns within the corpus revealing themes and key concepts across the collection within years and year-groups. While Leximancer is based on content analysis, it goes beyond mere word frequency counts (Gurney, 2017) to identify relations between themes and concepts. Leximancer identifies and visualises concepts that are built around co-occurring words and then forms themes around these concepts which helps reveal how ‘certain concepts travel together and in close association’ in the production of discourse (or ‘meaning making’) (Hodge and Matthews, 2011, p. 312).

After identifying and analysing the top themes, concept seeds<sup>4</sup> and associated topics, to understand the meanings associated with different themes, we selected three of the most prominent themes for further analysis: *Australia; Government; and, Environment*. To analyse these three themes, we uploaded essays containing these three keywords to Leximancer and undertook manual analysis on random samples. Excel and SQL were used to do key word analysis on the titles of 2018 entries.

To analyse the interviews with finalists we conducted thematic analysis using NVivo, searching for the topics and the key ‘actors’ (human and non-human) actions and targets that young people identify in relation to their issue of concern. We then used inductive manual coding to identify major themes as they arose from the data. Manual analysis examined why young people write about specific topics and what they hope their participation in the competition might achieve. This analysis provides a thick account of the political nature of winning essays and to contrast, compare and contextualise the findings from the thematic analysis.

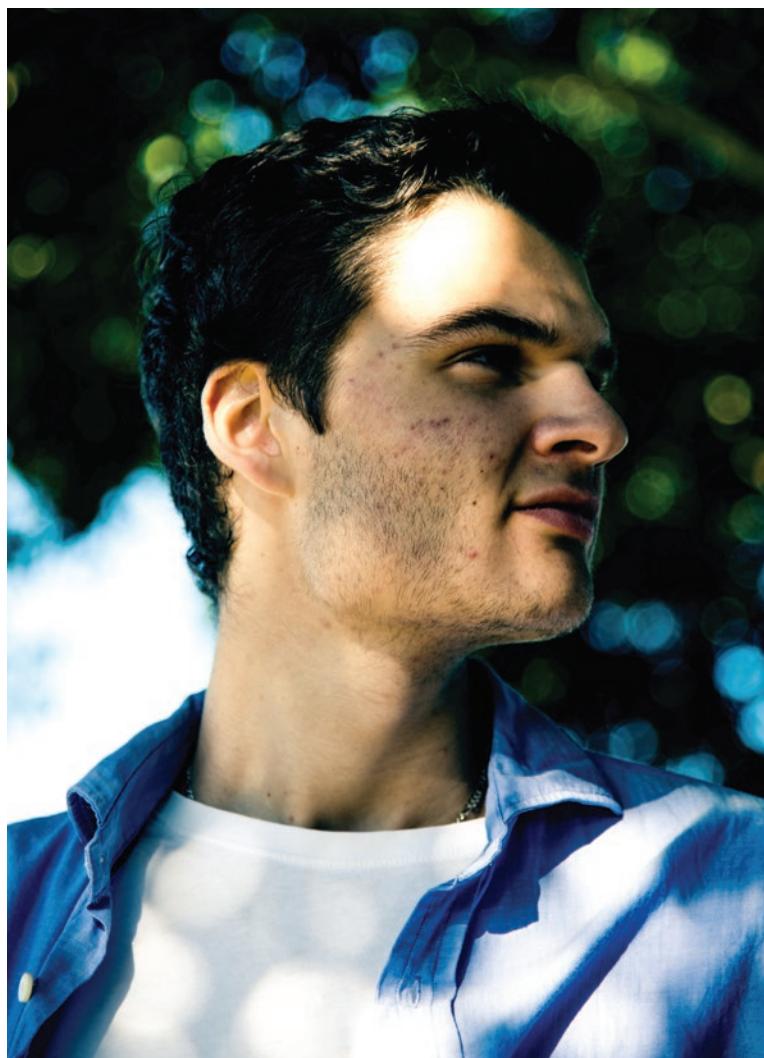
## Notes on reading this report

On a qualitative data set this large and rich, the scope for analysis and exploration is infinite. To contain the analysis, many decisions had to be made to focus the enquiry. Methods were required that could work with the diversity of texts in terms of how essays were written (by hand or typed) as well as the styles and levels of literacy which young people had written. We found that many writing styles did not easily conform to entry requirements and therefore topic analysis was a challenge. For example, the most common title in each year level, year group and for the entire corpus was ‘What Matters’. The most commonly occurring couplet was ‘what matters’ and even in 2018 when the online form specifically asked what topic the essay addressed, authors were still most likely to write ‘what matters’. To address this, we developed several approaches to access themes, topics and issues, as detailed above, but note that future analysis will ideally combine natural language processing with random sampling for manual analysis to closely map topics to year levels and groups.

Finally, the *What Matters?* writing competition asks young people for their consent for entries to be published, but not for use in research. In 2019 research ethics approval was granted (H12951) to analyse the collection of digitised essay entries from 2010 – 2018. However, because a consent waiver was applied, we are not permitted to publish any entry extracts which limits the ways in which we can illustrate the findings. Consequently, we encourage readers to read the award-winning entries that have been published by the Whitlam Institute for a glimpse of the diverse, passionate and compelling writing of Australian students that we report on here. Ethics approval to quote and illustrate the findings from the 12 interviews was granted.

This following section presents the findings according to:

1. What Matters?: key themes young people write about each year
2. What young people mean when they write about What Matters: Environment, Australia and Government
3. The role of gender: Targeted quantitative analysis on 2018 entries
4. In their own words: Thematic analysis of interviews conducted with competition finalists



4 A concept seed contains the words that most frequently co-occur within texts alongside theme words. For example, the theme *People* may have a concept seed that contains the words ‘better’, ‘society’, ‘live’ ‘change’.

# Findings

## What Matters? Key themes young people write about

Automatic content analysis (ACA) using Leximancer generated themes across calendar year and class groups. We identified the top themes across all school year levels and by competition year and conducted initial analysis comparing between year levels and over time.

Young people write about a very wide variety of *issues* within each year group, in each year of the competition and from one year to the next. However, there are some *themes* they consistently write about. Across the corpus we see the recurrence of broad themes such as *People*, *Society*, *the World* and aspects of *Student Lives*, which often includes their friends, family and the importance of caring for others. These themes occur across the full nine-year corpus in all age groups.

The theme most young people have written about over the years of the competition is *People*. *World* and *Life* are the next two most common themes addressed across all years and school age groups. Looking at each year of the competition we identify more specifically the ways in which young people are writing to these themes.

In 2010 young people wrote on the themes of *People*, *World*, *Life*, *Time*, *Children*, *Animals* and *Society* (Table 2). These themes related to questions of how we live, including material aspects (money, food, pollution and the environment), relationships to others (how we treat and care for other living things) and temporality (how things are now and what they will be like in the future).

**Table 2: Main themes in 2010**

YEAR	Yr 5 – 6	Yr 7 – 8	Yr 9 – 10	Yr 11 – 12
2010	<b>People</b> live, money, take, lives, bad	<b>People</b> need, live, better, care, take, able, future	<b>People</b> world, society, live, need, lives, believe, better, change, care, future, today, place	<b>People</b> need, important, believe, better, others, future, look, living
	<b>World</b> things, society, better, believe, everyone, care, place	<b>Life</b> things, family, important, others, feel, believe, different, someone	<b>Life</b> things, family, friends, feel, person, love, someone, having	<b>Life</b> family, things, person, care, someone, friends
	<b>Life</b> family, friends	<b>World</b> world, society, change, lives, place, look	<b>Time</b> day, school, down, look, work, home, parents	<b>World</b> lives, take, become, age, able
	<b>Need</b> environment, stop, change, problem	<b>Children</b> money, food, work	<b>Take</b> money, able, living, become, education, doing	<b>Society</b> Australia
	<b>Animals</b> trees, down, pollution	<b>Time</b> school, day	<b>Children</b> young, food, stop, child	<b>Time</b> live

In 2011, the theme of *People* is still very strong, but entrants write more about *Family*, *Children* and *School* than previously (Table 3). The concept of *Day* appears regularly and is associated with concepts that suggest young people are more focused in this year on the present or everyday settings and relationships of school, work and local place.

**Table 3: Main themes in 2011**

YEAR	Yr 5 – 6	Yr 7 – 8	Yr 9 – 10	Yr 11 – 12
2011	<b>People</b> world, things, society, countries, living	<b>People</b> world, need, live, care, better, change	<b>People</b> world, society, need, live, better, lives, believe, change, living, place, care, future, stop	<b>People</b> world, take, need, lives, live
	<b>Life</b> need, care, better, important, lives, everyone	<b>Life</b> things, important, believe, everyone, different, love	<b>Life</b> things, family, take, feel, someone	<b>Life</b> time, feel, things, love, friends, place, stop
	<b>Food</b> water, down, use, trees, die	<b>Family</b> time, friends, person, feel	<b>Children</b> day, food, money, work, having, child, parents	<b>Life</b> time, feel, things, love, friends, place, stop
	<b>Children</b> day, time, home, bad	<b>School</b> day, home, parents, down	<b>Countries</b> Australia, water, country	<b>Children</b> year, young, parents, able
	<b>Money</b> stop, take	<b>Children</b> food, money, work	<b>Time</b> school, friends	<b>Day</b> family, school, down

In 2012 *People* is again the most common theme (Table 4). As well as *People*, in 2012 entrants are concerned with the *World* and they write about *Australia*, which emerges as a dominant theme. In 2012 we see young people writing more about society, the world and Australia's place in it, than their own personal lives. They also write about *Children* and specifically about the need for *Education*. We also see them writing about the media in relation to young children.

**Table 4: Main themes in 2012**

YEAR	Yr 5 – 6	Yr 7 – 8	Yr 9 – 10	Yr 11 – 12
2012	<b>People</b> food, water, stop, money, bad	<b>People</b> world, need, live, take, society, better, lives, stop, care, place, able, living	<b>People</b> world, society, need, live, better, change, today, place, issue, needs, stop	<b>People</b> life, things, important, lives, better
	<b>Things</b> need, believe, better, take, care, everyone, place, different, society	<b>Life</b> things, family, matters, important, believe, everyone, matter, different, others, doing	<b>Life</b> things, believe, person, feel, important, look, someone, social	<b>World</b> believe, live, change, country, living
	<b>World</b> live, countries, Australia, environment, lives, country	<b>Australia</b> countries, money, food, water, country	<b>Children</b> day, school, education, work, child	<b>Time</b> need, family, others, different
	<b>Life</b> family, children, friends, work, person, love	<b>Time</b> school, parents, work, home, look, makes	<b>Countries</b> Australia, money, food, living, country, water	<b>Children</b> young, media, issue
	<b>Time</b> school, parents, feel, child, home, kids	<b>Children</b> day, down	<b>Take</b> lives, able, care, future	<b>Society</b> today, future

*People*, *Children*, *Family* and *Life* are the main themes in 2013 (Table 5). The theme of *Feel* and related concepts of *Someone* and *Bullying* shows that young people are concerned about bullying. We also see the theme of *Women* entering the top five themes for the older age group.

**Table 5: Main themes in 2013**

YEAR	Yr 5 – 6	Yr 7 – 8	Yr 9 – 10	Yr 11 – 12
2013	<b>People</b> world, live, stop, Australia, change, care, lives, place, country	<b>People</b> world, matters, society, better, lives, change	<b>People</b> world, society, need, believe, live, lives, change, better, become, issue, future	<b>Society</b> world, time, live, lives, media, become, others, issue
	<b>Life</b> things, believe, everyone, important, better, different, future, society	<b>Life</b> things, need, believe, important, everyone, others, matter, stop, doing	<b>Children</b> day, school, young, child, year, women, work parents	<b>People</b> need, day, Australia, school, future, social
	<b>Children</b> day, school, time, education, work, home	<b>Family</b> time, school, friends, work, love, home, parents	<b>Life</b> things, feel, take, look, social, media, bullying	<b>Life</b> believe, change, better, take, human, look, education
	<b>Family</b> child, kids	<b>Feel</b> person, someone, bullying	<b>Time</b> family, friends, having	<b>Children</b> young, work
	<b>Animals</b> environment	<b>Children</b> day, take, child, young	<b>Person</b> different, others, important, someone	<b>Women</b> family, person

In 2014 we again see recurring themes of *People*, *Life* and the *World* and *Society* (Table 6). Younger age groups are still writing about *Family*, *Feeling* and *Care* for others. Among the older age groups concepts such as the future and technology in relation to the themes of *Need* and *World* first emerge as prominent. *Media* enters the top five themes for the year 11 – 12 school age group.

**Table 6: Main themes in 2014**

YEAR	Yr 5 – 6	Yr 7 – 8	Yr 9 – 10	Yr 11 – 12
2014	<b>People</b> world, need, live, food, stop, believe, money, future, living, bad	<b>People</b> world, need, live, important, lives	<b>People</b> society, need, lives, live, become, believe, better, change, social, media, able, look	<b>Life</b> world, live, matter, lives, things, feel
	<b>Life</b> things, matters, important, feel, everyone, better, care, take, different	<b>Life</b> things, take, better, place, care	<b>Life</b> things, person, everyone, feel, different, someone, important, others, technology,	<b>People</b> society, become, money
	<b>School</b> time, children, day, work, home, place	<b>Children</b> food, countries, money, living, education, Australia, country	<b>World</b> take, future, having, today, living	<b>Need</b> believe, important, technology, future, better, living
	<b>Family</b> bullying, friends, person, love, someone	<b>Feel</b> friends, person, someone, look	<b>Time</b> day, family, friends, work, down	<b>Media</b> Australia, social
	<b>Australia</b> year, countries, country	<b>Time</b> school, family, parents	<b>Children</b> young, education, year, age	<b>Children</b> young, education

*Life, World, Society and People* are the main themes across the corpus and they are prominent in 2015 (Table 7). Interestingly, for the youngest age group, *Money* enters as a theme in relation to countries and homelessness. Friends and family are still important, and *Education* and *Technology* are concepts that are increasingly being associated with themes of *Society*, *World* and *Children*. Concepts such as *Media* become more prominent in the later years of the corpus.

**Table 7: Main themes in 2015**

YEAR	Yr 5 – 6	Yr 7 – 8	Yr 9 – 10	Yr 11 – 12
2015	<b>People</b> world, need, things, live, believe, society, care, take, place, lives	<b>People</b> life, things, family, believe, better, take, education, able, care	<b>People</b> world, need, live, believe, better, lives, change, living	<b>People</b> society, need, individuals, better, able, believe
	<b>Life</b> better, family, important, feel, person, friends	<b>World</b> need, live, society, change, lives	<b>Life</b> things, feel, everyone, person, important, take, others, able, having, money, doing	<b>Life</b> live, lives, take, day, happiness
	<b>Money</b> Australia, day, countries, home, country, poor, homeless	<b>Time</b> children, school, day, work, home, look, parents	<b>Society</b> Australia, health, become, countries, issue, fact, mental, today	<b>World</b> children, technology, individual, become
	<b>Children</b> school, time, education, work	<b>Friends</b> feel, someone, person, others, bullying, social	<b>Children</b> young, work, media, social, education	<b>Young</b> education, change, future
	<b>Animals</b> down	<b>Stop</b> Money	<b>Time</b> day, school, family, look	<b>Australia</b> women, health

In 2016 the theme of *People* is strongly related to the *Environment*, *Food*, *Change*, *Future*, *Living*, *Different* and *Better* (Table 8). In the year following the Paris Agreement, and with heightened awareness of the urgency to act on climate change, essays link questions of how we live as people to the planet and systems that sustain us. Across all age groups, students mainly wrote about *Friends* and *Family*, and they are still engaging with themes of *Children* and *Education*, *Creating Better Futures* and *Love*.

**Table 8: Main themes 2016**

YEAR	Yr 5 – 6	Yr 7 – 8	Yr 9 – 10	Yr 11 – 12
2016	<b>People</b> world, need, better, live, society, place, change, believe, lives, environment, future	<b>People</b> world, need, live, believe, lives, better, change, society, money, place, future	<b>People</b> world, society, need, live, believe, better, lives, take, change, future, become, living, food	<b>People</b> life, need, young, look, different, believe, better
	<b>Life</b> things, important, care, everyone, different, someone, work, person, others	<b>Life</b> family, things, feel, friends, take, love, someone, person, able, doing, makes	<b>Life</b> family, important, feel, person, able, friends, love, someone	<b>World</b> society, social, live, change, media
	<b>Animals</b> food, stop, water, die, use	<b>Time</b> day, school, home, parents, look	<b>Children</b> health, mental, education, social, young, year	<b>Time</b> feel, take, down, someone, friends
	<b>Day</b> time, children, school, home, look, kids	<b>Animals</b> food, stop, Australia, countries	<b>Time</b> day, school, work, down, parents, look, having	<b>Children</b> future, education, age, able, today
	<b>Family</b> matters, friends, feel, matter, love, happy	<b>Children</b> work, having, bad, child	<b>Human</b>	<b>Day</b> school, family

In 2017, the theme of *Children* is associated with concepts of *Detention*, *Refugees*, *Money* and *Health* (2017). This marked change shows that while young people have been writing about children consistently across the nine years, they engage with topical issues related to children as they arise in the national political sphere.

**Table 9: Main themes 2017**

YEAR	Yr 5 – 6	Yr 7 – 8	Yr 9 – 10	Yr 11 – 12
2017	<b>People</b> world, life, need, things, live, stop, better, care, lives, change, bad, important, living, place	<b>People</b> world, life, need, things, live, better, lives, take, food, different, important, change, having, care, place, stop, money	<b>People</b> world, need, live, society, lives, change, future, believe, health, social, better, different, living, become, human	<b>People</b> world, society, change, young, live, social, lives, media, future, Australia, country
	<b>Day</b> time, home, take, money, work, look	<b>Family</b> feel, friends, everyone, someone, person, love	<b>Life</b> time, things, family, feel, take, able, place, friends, stop	<b>Life</b> family, things, others, person, different, everyone, friends, able
	<b>School</b> family, children, friends, parents, kids, child, love	<b>Children</b> country, women, men	<b>Children</b> young, women, education, year, child, Australia, food, due, countries, age	<b>Feel</b> school, look, become, take, place
	<b>Feel</b> someone, person, education, different, bullying	<b>Australia</b> , refugees, detention, health	<b>Day</b> school, home, work, parents	<b>Time</b> day, love
	<b>Food</b> year, water	<b>Water</b> countries, living	<b>Down</b>	<b>Need</b> children, human

In 2018, all school age groups continued the trend of writing about *People* (Table 10), however, this theme becomes more complex and is associated with concepts of *Future* and *Change for Humans*. In school years 9 – 10 *People* is also associated with *Health* and *Social*. The themes *Children* and *Animals* are still prevalent in 2018. *Australia* as a theme is associated with *Refugees*, and *Detention* for the year 7 – 8 group, which continues the trend we see starting in 2017. Importantly the theme of *People* has expanded across the corpus, and is evident in all age groups, focusing on the future, change, a better society and what they deem as important for the world.

**Table 10: Main themes 2018**

YEAR	Yr 5 – 6	Yr 7 – 8	Yr 9 – 10	Yr 11 – 12
2018	<b>People</b> world, life, need, things, live, stop, take, care, lives, change, bad, living, place, start	<b>People</b> world, life, need, things, live, lives, better, take, different, important, change, future, having, doing, place, stop, care	<b>People</b> world, need, live, society, lives, future, change, believe, social, health, better, living, different, human, become	<b>People</b> world, life, live, family, things, others, lives, different, become, everyone, friends
	<b>Day</b> day, time, home, money, look	<b>Australia</b> refugees, country, detention, countries, health, living	<b>Life</b> time, things, feel, take, family, able, everyone, look, place, friends	<b>Society</b> change, need, social, young, children, media, future, Australia, country
	<b>Feel</b> someone, better, person, education, important, bullying, doing	<b>Children</b> women, men, food, water, animals	<b>Children</b> health, mental, education, social, young, year	<b>School</b> feel, take, place
	<b>Animals</b> Humans, die	<b>Family</b> feel, friends, someone, love	<b>Children</b> school, day, young, women, education, year, child, work, age, girls	<b>Time</b> day, love, person, able
	<b>Food</b> year, water	<b>Time</b> time, day, school, home, work	<b>Australia</b> Food, countries, animals	<b>Down</b> home

The themes and concepts identified show that, from 2010 – 2018, young people have primarily taken a social perspective on ‘what matters’: they are writing about *Others*, the *Social World*, *Their Place* in it and the kind of world they hope for. The ‘others’ they write about (that is, not themselves) come in many different forms: sometimes the nation, sometimes their family and friends. Over time we see, increasingly, the ‘other’ that young people write about is the natural environment, water, animals, air and food. In all years, we see them writing about issues germane to politics at that time, such as refugees, detention centres and the rights of children. Across the nine years of the corpus, we see them writing about issues that are of concern generally to people and communities such as age, death, smoking and cancer.

Consistently, over the nine years, younger entrants tend to write to more ‘proximate’ themes that relate to their everyday lives and experiences, personal relationships and feelings. Older students write more about concepts and structural forces in society, such as *Human Rights*, *Education* and *Gender*. Within themes, young people write about a diverse range of more specific topics.

## Topics

The 27,814 entries we analysed show that young people write about a wide range of topics. Essays reflect their hopes and concerns, and that they are actively responding to and thinking about current global and local issues. The *What Matters?* collection shows that young people write about topics in detailed and thoughtful ways. Their essays reflect on challenges and what they see as solutions to these problems. They also write about the things they value, the different ways of living in the world and how they imagine it could be better.

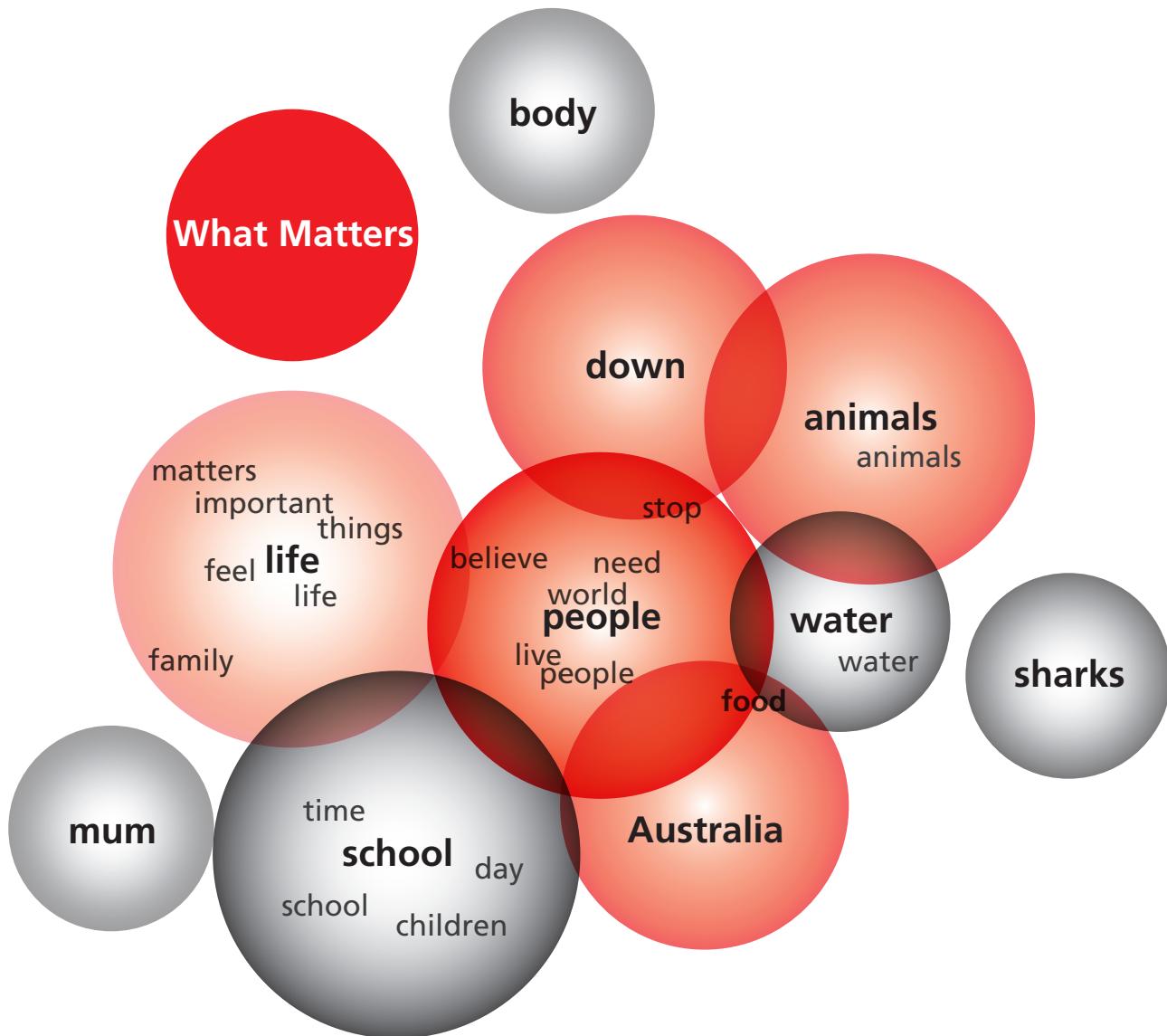
Some of the common topics for all ages and years refer to the immediate and personal worlds of these young writers. They are concerned with their *Friends*, *Family*, *Pets*, *Money*, feelings such as *Love* and *Caring for Others*. As well as these topics, younger age groups write about their *Parents*, *Play* and *Homework*, while older age groups reflect on *Time*, *Appreciating Life*, *Music* and having *Empathy* for others. While there is some self-selection in the group of entrants, and most students may have been guided by a teacher to think about ‘what matters’ in particular ways, these topics, nonetheless, offer a counter-narrative to the common tropes and moral panic that young people are (increasingly) self-interested, narcissistic and fickle.

Indeed, our analysis finds that entrants are not only concerned with personal issues. Rather, most entries are attentive to issues that matter because of the way they affect others, society and the world. Young people across all age groups write about *Poverty*, *Homelessness*, *Education* and *Gender Equality*. They write about the need for change and making society a better place for all. The main topics that make up this broad spectrum of worldly concerns are:

- Environmental issues such as pollution, use of plastics and climate change.
- Women’s rights and education for women and girls across the world. This includes many gender specific issues such as violence against women, inequality and gender-based discrimination.
- Australia’s place in a global system
- Human rights and child rights
- The extinction of human and animal species
- Caring and providing for others less fortunate than themselves

Additionally, all age groups write about *Animals*, *Mental Health*, *Technology*, *Food Security*, *Water Use*, *Sport*, *Technology* and *Love* and *Happiness* or *Living a Fulfilling Life*. Preliminary analysis shows when young people write about *Animals*, key topics are *Cruelty*, their own *Pets* and environmental concerns about the survival of different animal species (for example *Koalas*). *Mental Health* essays are often concerned with *Depression*, *Bullying* and *Loneliness*. When writing about *Sport*, young people address topics such as *Eliminating Racism*, *Players as Role Models*, the *Pleasures of Playing Sport* and *Gender Equality* in sports. Young people are also concerned with issues specific to the Australian context, like *Drought*, *Australia's Treatment of Refugees and Asylum Seekers*, *Multiculturalism*, *Gun Control*, and *Australian Migrant and Immigrant Lives*.

**Figure 1 Leximancer map of main themes years 5 – 6, 2014**



This image shows the main themes that young people from the year 5 – 6 school age group wrote about in 2014. Here we see the recurring themes of *People*, *School*, *Life* and *Australia*, and also *Sharks*. The inclusion of *Sharks* reflects students' awareness and engagement with live public policy issues: in 2014 the debates about shark attacks and culling

## Young people are writing about topical issues

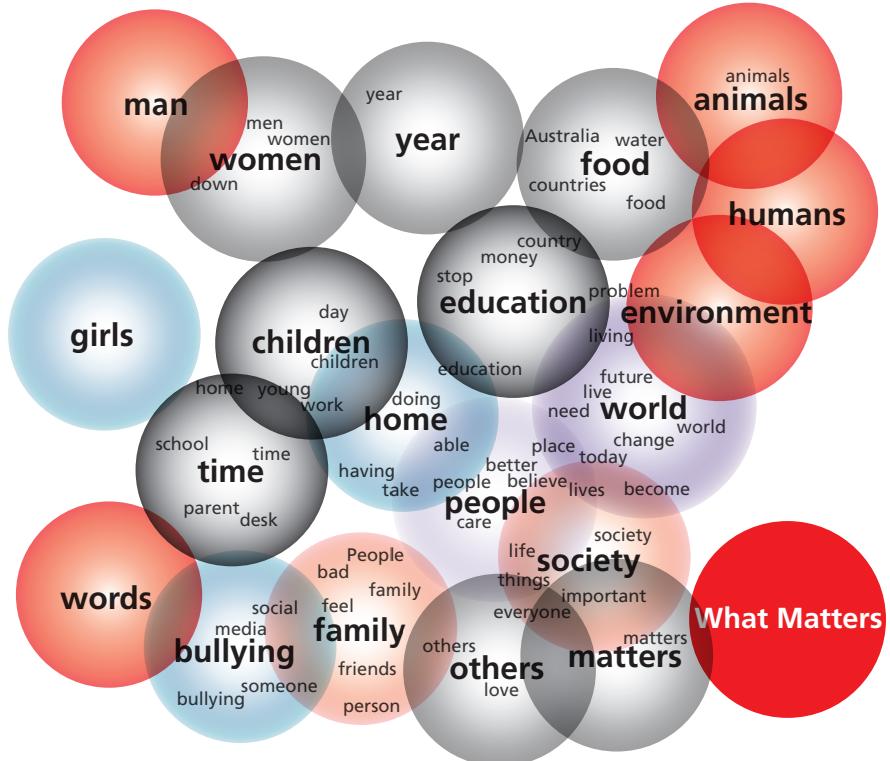
Across the corpus all age groups are writing about topical and relevant issues. Leximancer helped us identify some of these issues from year to year and we provide examples below. Our analysis shows that young people are specifically addressing issues that are debated in media, political and social arenas. This is clear evidence that they are engaged and paying attention. For example, Figure 1 shows the main themes year 5 – 6 entrants wrote about in 2014.

increased after swimmers died in Western Australia. Protests against culling also increased as debates about how to address the issue were held around Australia. At the time, there was a high level of media coverage due to the death of a teenage girl and reporting in a 'Behind the News' episode likely raised awareness and concern among school students.

Figure 2 shows the main themes young people in the school age group 7 – 8 were writing about in 2015. In this figure we see *Bullying* enter as a main theme. In this collection, the

theme of *Bullying* appears with concepts like *Social Media* and *Someone*.

**Figure 2 Leximancer map of main themes years 7 – 8, 2015**



The map indicates that young people are writing about *Bullying* in relation to *Social Media* and *Someone being Bullied*. In this topic map, we also see how the theme *World* is closely associated with concepts such as *Change*, *Future* and *Need*, indicating that essays discussing the *World* do so in relation to ideas about *Need*, *Future* and *Change*.

In 2017, we see increased focus on the topic of *Detention, Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Children in Detention*, especially among essays written by students in years 7 – 8 (Figure 3).

**Figure 3 Leximancer map of main themes years 7 – 8, 2017**

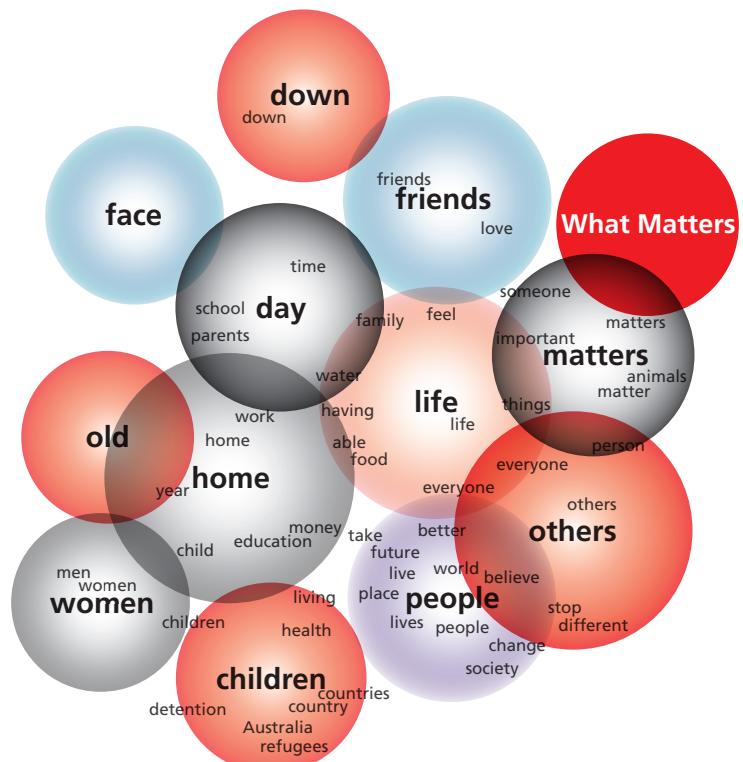


Figure 3 also shows how concepts of *Refugees* and *Detention* are associated with the theme of *Children*. As seen in Tables 1-9, the theme *Children* is present across most years of the competition, but young people are variously writing about concepts such as *Poverty*, *Mental Health* and *Education* in relation to *Children*. It is in 2017 that we see a significant increase in the density of entries that link *Children*, *Refugees* and *Asylum Seekers* – a year where a record 68.5m people were displaced around the world and the plight of people seeking asylum in the Mediterranean, in particular, garnered a lot of media coverage and debate in Australia.

## Young people are writing about complex issues

Initial analysis shows that young people write about issues in nuanced ways that reflect an awareness of the complexity of issues, the actors involved and the actions they believe can shape their issue of concern. In these discussions, they often describe the world they hope will exist for future generations. In these essays, young people show they are aware of their role in society and express a sense of responsibility for working towards a ‘better world’ or a ‘better society’. The interest in a ‘better world’ and a ‘better society’ is one of the overarching concerns reflected in many of the themes we analysed.

Entries are rarely concerned with ‘single issues’ but instead discuss associated topics and concerns as they constellate in relation to one another. For example, *Gender Inequality* is often discussed in relation to how people value themselves and others, how women are treated in the media, business and politics, and poverty. Similarly, essays reveal how young people imagine and reimagine many concepts, such as *Australian Identity* and explore how young people’s politics is active in contesting and reproducing this. This suggests a need to find ways to analyse and conceptualise young people’s political participation beyond talking about ‘single issue politics’. To illustrate this, below we discuss how young people write to the themes of *People*, *Life* and *World*.

**People:** Young people write about themselves, peers and other people in a variety of ways and young people of all ages write about *People* more than any other topic. When writing about *People*, they are most frequently reflecting on the role of humans in caring for each other, helping the less fortunate, changing society and the duty people have to consider the impact of their actions on future generations.

Essays in this theme are anthropocentric: they explore relationships between people, the relationship of people to society, and the relationship of people to the physical world. They also write about people in relation to taking action, making change and the future. This means that people, their actions, their responsibilities and the affective dimensions of care for others are central to essays on the topic of *People*.

**Life:** When writing about what matters to them, young people are consistently referring to the immediate world around them, and their own lives. *Life* as a theme refers to *My Life* but *Life* is also about *Family Life* around them, the *Living Environment* and the lives of others. *Relationships* are a core constitutive feature of this theme, with *Family* and *Friends* regularly appearing and discussed in terms of the need for

close, successful and fulfilling relationships. Young people also write about receiving help or giving care to family and friends, and the *Health* of those around them. Young people write about those who are important or influential in their life, like grandparents, extended family and other role models.

Entries consider and contrast different ways of living. When reflecting on the lives of others, entrants frequently contrast their own *Happiness*, *Wealth* and *Food Security* to those who are living in poverty or who have no family connections or whose lives are more difficult than the authors’ own. This includes those with mental health issues, the homeless, adults and children in war torn or poverty-stricken countries.

In this theme young people discuss whether non-human and material ‘things’ are important to life. Writers reflect on how material things like iPhones, Nintendos and clothes aren’t as important to their lives as their family and friends. Loving and caring for people in their lives is discussed, as is taking the time to be with others and enjoying them, and what life has to offer. When writing about *Life* as a theme young people use it as a point of reflection about what is important. In this theme we see young people (especially in the older age groups) reflecting on what will make them happy, what they want to do with their lives and the kinds of jobs, *Futures* and *Life Choices* that will bring them rewards and happiness.

**World:** As with other themes, the discourses in the theme *World* are varied, although hope for making the world a better place was prominent. For some a ‘better’ world can be achieved through better recognition and care for the interconnectedness of natural, social and economic systems. Young people writing about *World* in this theme are also concerned with war and world peace. Concerns about the *Environment* are prominent in this theme; young people write about sustainability and the survival of the world from an environmental perspective.

The world in this theme encompasses both local and global dimensions. Young people are concerned with global issues and Australia’s place within a global system, but also Australian specific responses to global issues like *Climate Change*, *the Movement of People*, *Refugees*, *Asylum Seekers* and *Poverty*. Essays in this theme address broad ranging policy driven topics like *Foreign Aid*, *Migration* and *Military Spending*. The *World* in this theme also encompasses the digital sphere. Young people reflect on their use of technology, the connectedness they feel with others, but also the sense of a rapidly changing world. Young people also see themselves as citizens of the world who have the capacity to act and voice the changes they want to see.

There are many essays in this theme that reflect on the need for government and community actions in response to global and environmental challenges. Young people consistently reflect on their own individual actions and the kinds of actions other young people can take. We also identified that different age groups write about the world in different ways. For example, years 5 – 6 tended to write about the world in relation to finding ways to make the world a better place for everyone. While year 11 – 12 students think about the effects that different forces or changes to the natural and social world (such as *Climate Change*, *Technology* and *Social Media*) have on the planet. *Climate Change*, *Coral Bleaching*, *Animal Extinction*, *Deforestation*, *Drought* and *Pollution* were cited as global issues that need immediate and thoughtful responses.

## Case Study – Environment

Young people are becoming increasingly concerned about environmental issues (Carlisle et al., 2019 and Collin and McCormack, 2020). Our research shows that young people are writing about the environment in the *What Matters?* competition and that the way they are writing about it is both increasing and intensifying. *Sustainability and Environmental Conservation* are topics that feature in all year groups and years of the competition, although the topics young people write about are diversifying over time. For example, in 2010, young people were expressing concerns about the *Environment* through their discussion on *Global Warming, Clean Water and Sanitation, Warming Oceans and Pollution*. They worried about *Destabilisation of the Environment, Rising Sea Levels and Melting Glaciers*. Some older students were reflecting on the 2009 Copenhagen Conference, the Kyoto protocol and asking readers to find ways to change human behaviour. By 2015, students were writing about specific industries identified as contributing to habitat loss, such as palm oil manufacturing and deforestation. They wrote about *Climate Change, Conservation of the Great Barrier Reef and Sustainable Energy*. In their essays they make connections between the *Environment, the World, those that inhabit it and the future* with concerns about the possible *Extinction of Animals and Humans*.

This trend significantly grew from 2016 – the year the Paris Agreement was brought into effect. Young people were increasingly writing about *Pollution, Deforestation and Melting Ice Caps*. *Ocean Pollution* emerged as a major concern, with young people writing about the effect this has on ocean dwelling animals like turtles, whales and sharks. The *Destruction of the Great Barrier Reef* was again a prevalent concern for students in 2018. *Drought* in Australia and in other parts of the world was a common topic, illustrating how writers consistently connected environmental concerns at the local level to global situations and impacts, from local rivers to oceans and the loss of native Australian flora and fauna as well as forests and animals all over the world.

## The issues that have most concerned young people writing in the *What Matters?* competition

Young people write about a broad set of issues that span local and global contexts and engage with historical, environmental, economic, social and cultural concerns. Essays grapple with contemporary problems but also look to both the past and the future for solutions and ways to understand and navigate these issues. Young people are aware of and concerned with contemporary events in Australian politics. For example, they write about the *Cronulla Riots, the Apology to Aboriginal Australians, Black Saturday Bushfires, the Stop the Boats Campaigns, Mandatory Internet Filtering, the Queensland Floods* and campaigns such as *Change the Date*. Over the nine years of the competition, entrants consistently address government policies prominent at different times in public debate, such as *Same Sex Marriage, Sustainable Energy and Power Systems, Immigration, Deforestation of Land and the Extinction of Native Species*.

Equally, young people write about *Global Politics* and often write from their own experiences. For example, there are many entries by young immigrants writing about their experiences in war torn countries or what it is like to be a refugee. Some students write about their arrival to Australia and the hopes they have for a different life. Young people show a great depth of knowledge and understanding about power, economic inequality, forms of governance and democratic and non-democratic governments. They write about global networked *Systems of Inequality* such as *Poverty, the Development Status of Nations, Displacement of Peoples, Global People Trafficking and Global Trade Systems*.

Across the corpus they are most concerned about the *Environment* and essays about *Global Warming, the Future of the Human Species, Water Use, Coral Bleaching and Pollution* increasingly call for global action.

Wake  
up



# What do young people mean when they write about 'What Matters?'

Much research on what concerns young people is at the thematic level, for example, *Education*, *Climate Change*, *Health*. While we see the same themes over the years, topics and issues vary from year to year and among school age groups. For example, young people address the theme of *Racism*, but the topics they use to explore the issue of racism change over time.

To understand how young people conceptualise different issues, we consider the events, actors, actions, norms and values that reflect their concerns and views. To do so we undertook a deep dive into a selection of themes identified as prominent and important in the *What Matters?* collection. The topics *Australia* and *Environment* were chosen because of the frequency with which they appear in the corpus. *Government* was also chosen as an example of a tangible theme within the texts where young people discuss political issues, actions and change. Keyword searches were used to identify essays that address these topics and then grouped essays containing these key words were analysed in Leximancer for each year level by year (2010-2017).

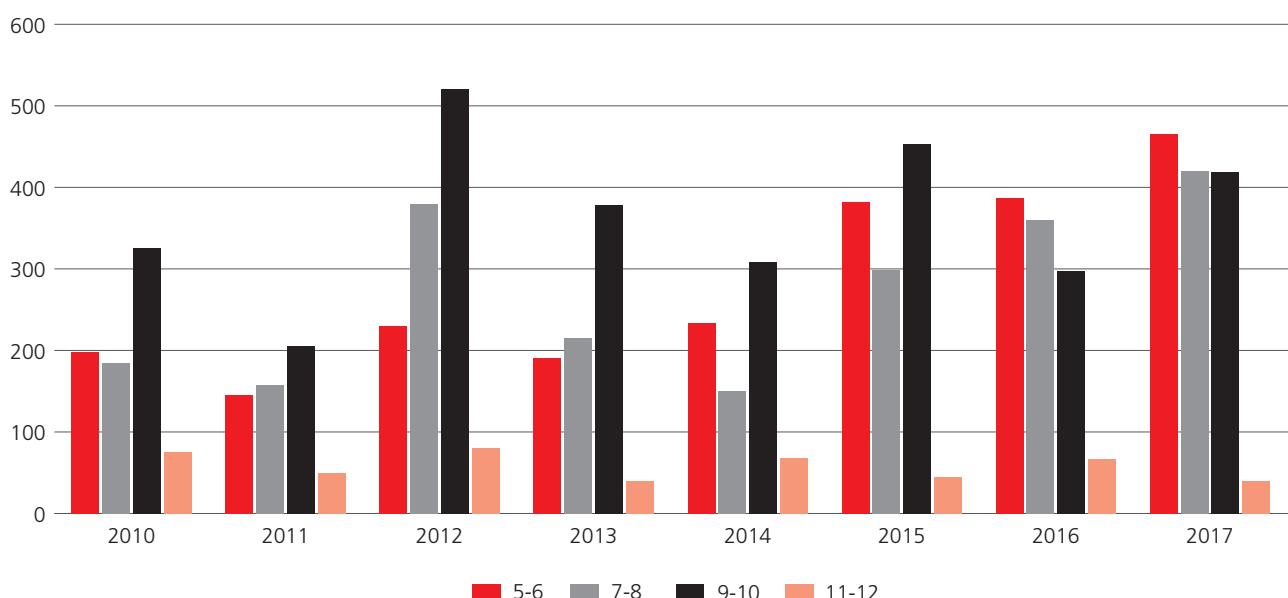
## Australia

Essays that are written about *Australia* highlight the ways young people are concerned with global issues and Australia's place within a global system. Frequently essays in this theme situate Australia as a 'lucky country' and reflect on the prosperity and opportunities of living in Australia, including high quality education, health and political systems. The status of Australia as a developed country and its responsibility to those less fortunate is a recurring discourse. Essays also reflect on Australia's future position in the world, and the need for Australia to take leadership on environmental, economic and humanitarian challenges. Essays express concern for others who do not have the same quality of life, freedom or democratic institutions as those who live in Australia. Equally there is frequent reflection on Australia's human rights record, it's treatment of asylum seekers and Aboriginal Australians.

The table below shows the number of entries submitted with the word *Australia* across each year group and between 2010 and 2017. In years 9 and 10 more students are including the word *Australia* in their essays.

**Graph 1: Entries submitted that include the word Australia by year group (2010 – 2017)**

### Australia



Between 2010-2018 essays that include the word *Australia* are common. In the broader theme of *Australia* young people write about a variety of topics. These topics include significant events such as the *Global Financial Crisis*, *Kevin Rudd and the Apology to Aboriginal Australians*, *Gallipoli*, and the *Cronulla Riots*. They also explore ideas of being Australian in relation to the *Australian Flag*, *Australia Day*, *Rights of Aboriginal Australians* and the *Closing the Gap* policy. Topics discussed include *Equality*, *Fairness*, *Just Policy* and *Anti-racist Approaches to Inclusion*. Policy issues such as *Public Transport*, *Access to Resources*, *Education*, *Internet Speed*,

*Alcohol Abuse*, *Smoking*, *Jobs*, *Homelessness* and *Medicare* are also common topics through which young people write in relation to *Australia*. *Australia's Future and Need for Innovation* also concern these writers. For example, *Space Exploration*, *Solar Power*, *Population Growth*, *Immigration*, *Over Reliance on Mining and Extraction of Resources* are topics of discussion. The wide variety of topics across school age groups and across the years demonstrates how young people engage with political issues in a broad way. The essays also demonstrate how students engage with the substance of democracy, more than the procedural or institutional aspects.

The essays reveal common concerns that young people have when they are writing about Australia, such as the *Responsibility* Australia has as a developed country towards countries in need or crisis, emphasising principles of *Care* and *Reciprocity*. Young people reflect on *Australia's Future Position* in the world, and they comment on leadership and often refer to specific politicians and policies in their writing. Writers question what it means to be Australian and how this can be reflected in the actions of Australian people and governments. Entrants also express opinions and concerns about Australian government policies in relation to *Equality, Access to Resources, Multiculturalism and Aboriginal Rights, Same Sex Marriage, Asylum Seekers and Detention, and Environmental Destruction*.

Between the years 2010 – 2018, many students wrote about a variety of issues and events, reflecting on contemporary questions for Australian society. For example, Kevin Rudd's 2008 *Apology to Aboriginal Australians* is an event that young people continue to write about over the nine years to consider the status of Aboriginal Australians and human rights abuses. The apology is used to address the question of *Racism* in Australia and to make comments about the progress, or lack of it, that has been made to close the gap in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Tied up in these discussions are arguments that being Australian should encompass a *Commitment to Equality, Human Rights and Human Security*.

In 2010 essays still engaged with past events such as the 2005 *Cronulla Riots*, the 2008 *Global Financial Crisis (GFC)* and *9/11*. In 2011 these events were often talked about in relation to the way Australian media outlets report on events and reproduce racist narratives about others. In 2012 entries, the *GFC* was linked to other global problems such as *Poverty*, the downgrading of the Australian economy and what Australian politicians should be doing in response. These essays indicate that some young people understand contemporary issues as historically contingent, and Australian society as formed through complex processes of globalisation.

Entrants also think about *Australia's Place in the World* by discussing current issues. In 2017 and 2018 for example, young people were writing about Syria, and *Australian Troops in the Middle East*. They wrote essays on *Refugees* escaping persecution in countries like Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea and expressed the *Hope that Refugees Feel* when looking to settle in Australia. Like those that write about past events these essays are concerned with *Human Rights, Multiculturalism, Anti-Racism and Humane Responses to Global Displacement of Peoples*. These essays ask questions about what it means to be Australian and express humanity. They are thinking about Australians as *Global Citizens*. Australian young people also write about their capacity to voice what they see as *Injustice* and *Inequality*. They often express desire for democratic approaches to *Social Justice* issues. One essay writer even labelled their generation as the 'democratic generation'.

Essays in the older school age groups 9 – 10 and 11 – 12 deal more specifically with policy issues. They write in more explicit terms about things they feel need to be changed (*Australia Day and Change the Date*). Essays in the older age groups tend to reflect more on specific events and what they represent about topics, such as *Racism*, or *Poverty*. Importantly essays in the year 11 – 12 age group consistently also refer to terms such as society, country, better, person and public. As young people get older their essays express more knowledge and more detailed discussion about issues. They also seem to reflect more polarised positions on those issues. For example, essays in the older age groups express stronger support or opposition to government policy on *Asylum Seekers* and *Same Sex Marriage*. As students get older their essays also mention *Australian Politicians* (actors) and the government parties in *Power*. The way they discuss actors, repertoires and democratic processes is more sophisticated. Whilst all age groups offer solutions to what they see as issues, in the older age groups, young people comment in more detail on policy options for specific issues, provide critique for policy that is in place and what they believe the government should be doing instead.



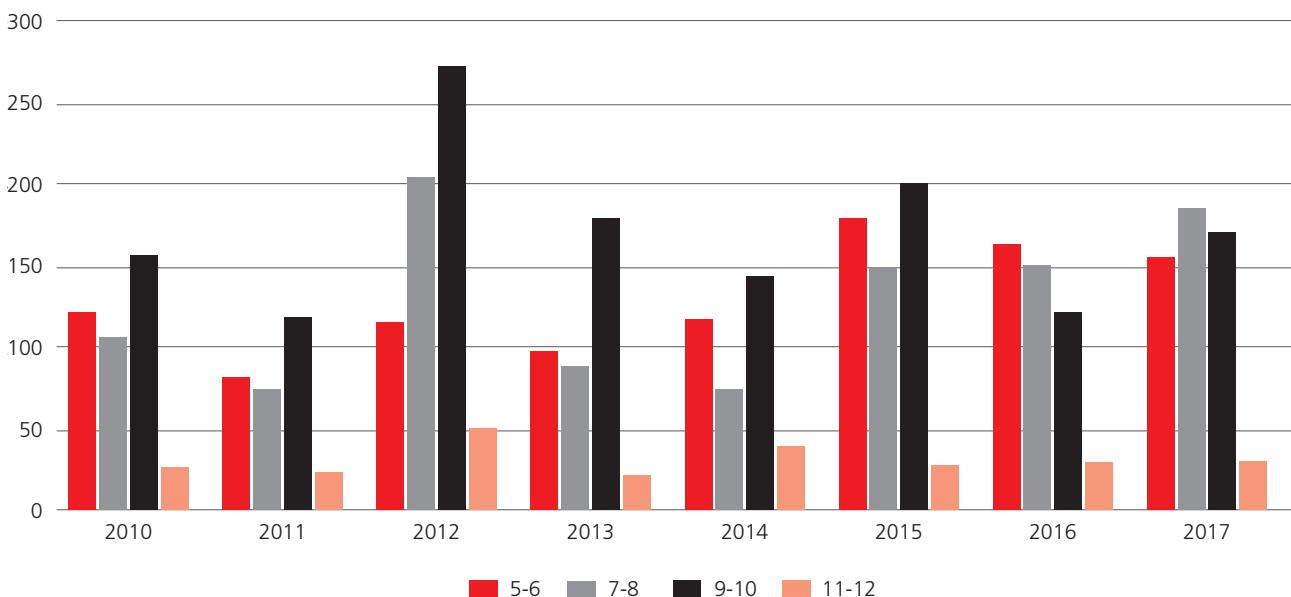
# Government

As with the term *Australia*, there are consistent discourses across the years which reflect the ways young people think about *Government*. There are also specific issues that young people write about where they address what *Governments* should and can do about the issues they are describing. As indicated in Graph 2, below, there was a significant spike in competition entrants writing in relation

to the concept of *Government* and *Leadership* in 2012. This was the year the incumbent Labor government had a leadership spill resulting in Julia Gillard replacing Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister. While the spill is not a common event discussed in this year, it did give rise to heightened scrutiny of Labor policies and the leadership of Julia Gillard, which is reflected in the essays in submitted in 2012.

**Graph 2: Essays that address the nature and role of Government (2010-2017)**

## Government



Young people write about *Government* in a few ways. Firstly, in terms of their actions on specific issues, for example *Deforestation* or *Animal Cruelty*. *Governments* are discussed as political actors that have responsibilities and resources to take action on issues as well. Young people also write about government in relation to specific public concerns, like *Public Transport*, *Healthcare* and the *Needs of Vulnerable Groups*, such as children in poverty or those who do not have adequate education.

The role of government in maintaining an equitable and cohesive society is a strong discourse. This is often expressed in terms of *Education*, *Reducing Poverty*, *Allocating Taxes and Funding* to those who are experiencing hardship such as homelessness, unemployment and are unable to meet their basic needs. The Australian Government is also viewed by many as needing to be global in its reach when it comes to helping those less fortunate. In some essays, governments are called upon to *Promote Qualities of Equality, Fairness and Support for Others*.

In most essays that use the term *Government*, authors are writing about issues and causes, including *Immigration*, *Drink Driving*, *Health Care*, *Climate Change*, *Bullying*, *Equal Pay*, *the Price of Milk*, *Drought*, and *Gun Control*. These essays are often coupled with a discussion on the way the Australian Government should direct funding or redistribute wealth to help solve these issues. In this way, the essayists reflect a positive attitude towards the role of governments in securing social goods such as *Health*, *Education*, *Safety* and a *Sustainable Climate and Environment*.

Young people are also concerned about the representativeness of Australian Governments. Many essays write about this in detail, most likely as a result of the way that young people are learning about democracy in the curriculum. Interestingly, young people write that governments should work in partnership with other governments as well as NGOs and communities, reflecting network governance norms. They are skeptical of the extent to which governments do this. They also write about concerns that Australian governments have taken insufficient action on issues such as *Climate Change*, *Pollution*, *Homelessness*, *Deforestation*, *Animal Rights*, *Racism* and *Poverty*. Young people call for more government action on the lack of *Public Transport*, *Saving Water*, *Emergency Systems for Bushfires* and *Bridging the Gap* between health and social outcomes for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. The essays reflect that young people want governments to play a key role in addressing these issues and working with others to achieve positive change. Over time, entrants continue to write about past government policies in detail, for example *Mandatory Internet Filtering*, *The Stolen Generations*, and '*Stop the Boats*'. This suggests that students develop a historically-informed view of key issues and that their civic and democratic values and norms develop in relation to these issues.

Essays that write about *Government* do so in a variety of ways, including engaging with government policy, comparison between national governments, responding to decisions governments have made in response to global events and expressing their own thoughts and opinions about government actions. Students also become more vocal about

government systems such as socialism, communism and democracy, wondering about the efficacy and problems of each system. As students get older, across all years, they write more about governments of different countries and compare these to the Australian Government and more commonly reflect concerns about the potential for governments to be corrupt, use power improperly and for politicians to use their position for their own gain. For example, older students more commonly reflect on Australian political representation, leadership spills and the way the action of politicians affects people's trust in government and the vital role of *Good Leadership* in governing. Older students are also more aware of and assess the impact of government policies such as *Lock Out Laws, Same Sex Marriage, Foreign Aid and Trade Relations*.

As they get older young people also write about being political, their own political actions and citizenship. They are more aware of democratic tensions of *Freedom and Security*, and essays include reflections on *Government Technological Surveillance*.

## Environment

Essays that include the word *Environment* have some of the most diverse content in terms of topics, actors, actions and aspirations, in the three themes the research explores in depth. *Environment* can mean the physical environment, a safe environment, hygienic environments, the relationship Aboriginal Australians have with the environment, human relationships with the Earth, technology and home environments, and learning environments.

Discussions about the *Environment* (in all uses of the word) often intersect with those about creating a *Better World*, being more mindful of resource uses and the impact of humans on the environment around them. Young people, when writing about the physical environment, often ask readers to reflect on what they have, what kinds of privileges

they are afforded and their actual needs. In these texts, there are common discourses of environmental rights, humans as selfish, the irreplaceability of Earth and the inextricable connection of humans to the environment. Many writers articulate a symbiotic relationship between humans and the earth.

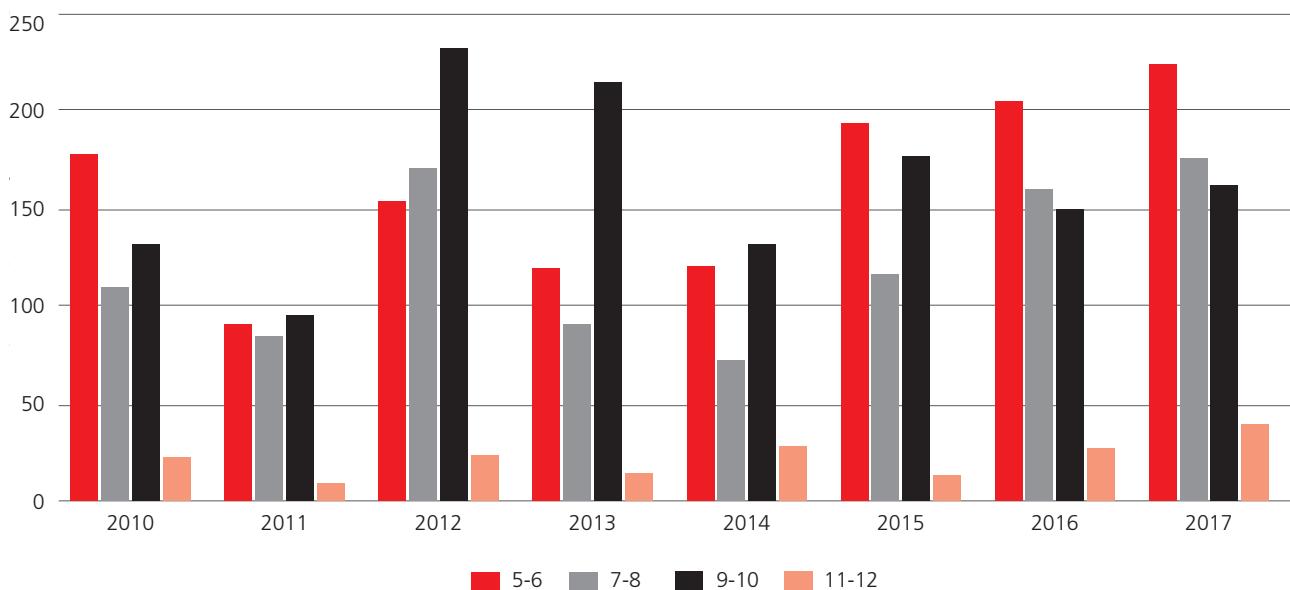
The *Future* is a major concern for young people writing about *Environments*. Different *Environments* are often seen as intersecting. For example, economic development, increase in living standards for those who live in poverty and the need to address *Global Warming* are often discussed in the same essay. They are not seen as separate issues, but issues which need to be addressed in a way that recognises they are linked. Similarly, essays on the *Environment* include discussions about future generations and human legacies. They are concerned that older generations are not doing enough to mitigate *Climate Change*. Young people of all ages who write about the *Environment* often include calls to action. Actions include small things like individual activities aimed at reducing use of plastics, as well as larger national and global campaigns for global bans on plastics in all manufacturing. Taking action is framed as 'making a difference' with consequences for future generations and as necessary for people of all ages.

Essays concerned with the *Environment* are often also concerned with consumerism and consumption. Consumption of materials that are not biodegradable, of foods and goods that aren't ethically produced (child labour). The overuse of resources and its effect on the *Environment* is a core concern. This often extends to government policy and the responsibilities of governments around the world to be held accountable for their lack of action.

*Environment and Community* are sometimes discussed together, local towns, regions and states are referenced in relation to both local and global environmental issues. Young people express understanding of how global environmental issues affect their local communities and the value of working together locally to make changes at the local level.

**Graph 3: Number of essays engaging with the term '*Environment*' (2010-2017)**

### Environment



As indicated in Graph 3, overtime, *What Matters?* entries are increasingly addressing topics related to the *Environment*.

# Gender and *What Matters?* 2018 Snapshot

The 3,692 2018 essays were, for the first time, entirely submitted online and thus include demographics such as gender, postcode, school, essay title and whether the entry had been uploaded by a student, parent or teacher. This made it possible to analyse the entries for relationships between these different variables, such as whether essay topics vary by gender.

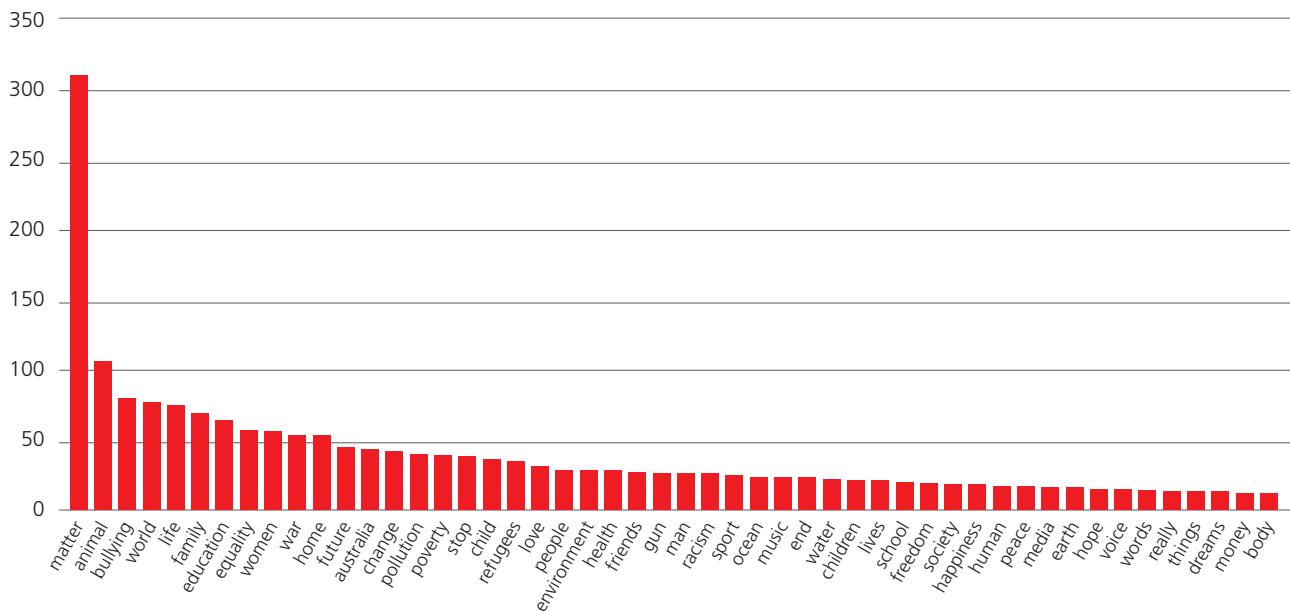
## Topics for 2018

While the competition entry form contained a separate title box, not all entrants named their essays in a way that indicated the topic they were engaging with. About 10% (311) of essays submitted in 2018 included the title of the competition in their essay, for example calling their essay different versions of the competition title such as 'What Matters', 'What Matters?', 'What Matters to me' and 'What

really matters'. Moreover, 140 of these have a key word such as *Animals*, *Women*, *Guns* and the word 'matters' in the title. The remaining 1808 entries contained topical titles indicating the issues young people wrote about in 2018.

To identify the top topics for 2018 we used SQL, which is a special-purpose programming language designed for managing data in a relational database. We identified the top 100 topics for 2018 by putting all of the entry names into SQL and from there did a keyword density search. Once we identified the top 50 keywords via density, we attributed each entry to these top keywords. Only those entries that fit the top 50 were given a keyword association (based on the frequency of occurrence). This allowed us to group similar entry names for more detailed analysis. For example, '*Animal Shelter*' and '*Animal Rights*' which would have previously been two different topics are now categorised under the broader topic of '*Animal*'. Topic keywords were therefore identified by frequency.

**Graph 4: Top 50 topics in *What Matters?* entries in 2018**



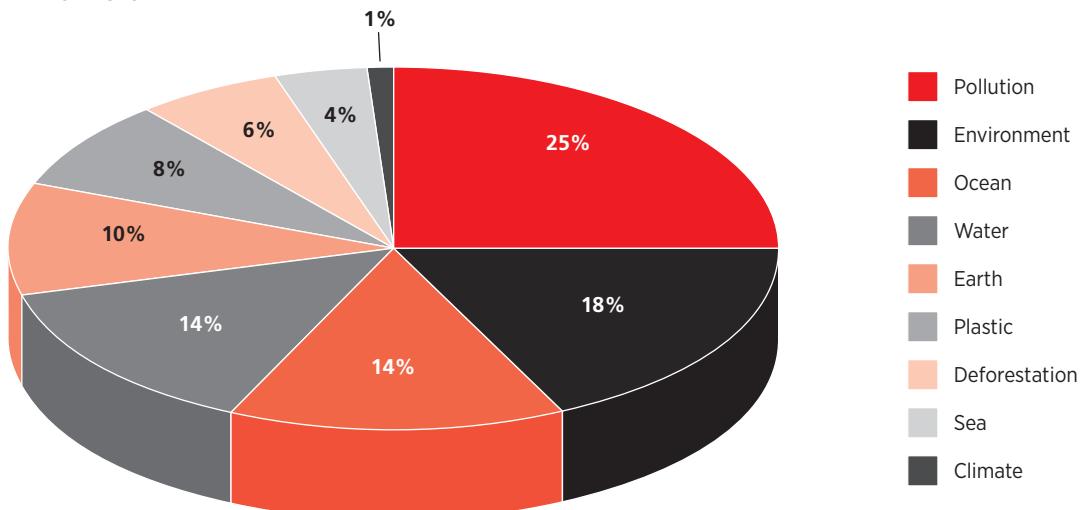
The most written about topic according to title is *Animals*. This includes topics such as *Animal Rights*, *Animal Welfare*, *Cruelty to Animals*, *Animals in Captivity*, *Endangered Animals* and *Animal Hunting and Testing*. The second most written about topic is *Bullying* then *World*. Entries on the topic of *World* include those that read as letters to the world, with titles like 'Dear World' and other more specific topics, like 'World Wars', 'Racism in my world', 'Domestic Violence in the world' and 'Helping Third-World Countries'. Topics about the

world also include 'Healing the World', 'Kindness, Educating the World' and 'The World around me'.

When topics that are most likely to be about the *Physical Environment* were grouped (Graph 5), we found that essays related to *Environment* in a density keyword analysis numbered at over 160 – making it one of the most significant topics for entrants in 2018.

**Graph 5: Essay topics related to natural environment in 2018**

#### Environment



In 2018 young people wrote about *Pollution* more than any other topic associated with the *Environment*. They were also concerned with *Oceans*, *Seas* and *Water*. A limitation of this graph is that we do not know the specific topics young people are writing about when they include the term *Environment* in their title. They tend to write titles like 'The Environment Matters'. Further analysis on those essays, which included the term *Environment* in their title, would clarify the focus and nature of young people's concerns in more detail.

## Topics and gender

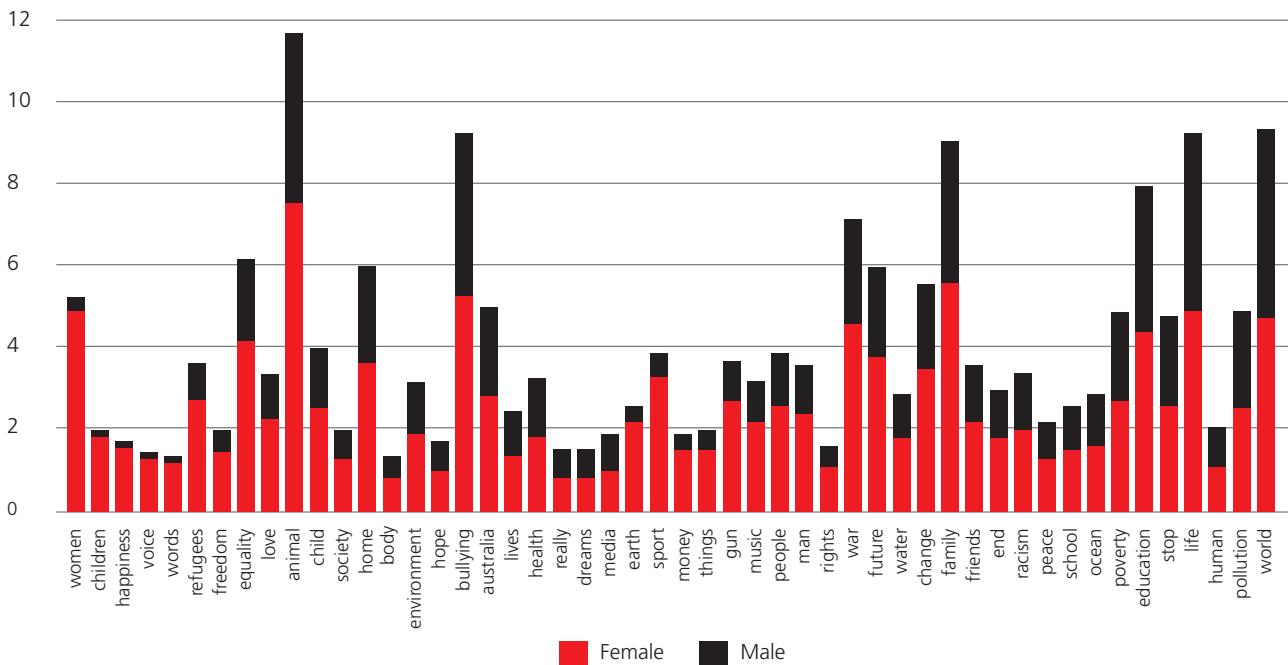
In 2018, more young people who identified as female submitted entries to the *What Matters?* competition. This

was across all year groups. Overall, 64.52% of entries were submitted by females, 34.70% by males and 0.79% by other. In all school years, females submit more than males. There is one school year where males and females submit close to equal amounts of entries – year 9.

In year 9, we see an increase in submissions by males, analysis shows that this was because one single sex boys school submitted 140 entries. This school did not submit entries in any other school year for 2018.

We used the top 50 topics for 2018 to do further analysis via gender. After determining our top keywords via a keyword density search in SQL we then attributed keywords to gender using Excel. The graph below shows the distribution of top 50 topics by gender.

**Graph 6: 2018 topics by gender**



In 2018 over 100 young people are writing about *Animals*. Of these 100 more than 80 entrants identify as female. We also see that more than 50 young people are writing about *Education* and *Equality* and that more females are writing about these topics than males. After further analysis of topics via gender we found that the *What Matters?* 2018 data entries are both skewed towards young women and that females and males are writing about different topics. Significantly, when normalised (see appendix D for explanation of this process) the data shows that young people write on topics in statistically significant gendered ways.

Our analysis shows that in 2018 young women are writing proportionately more about topics such as *Women*, *Environment*, *Children*, *Voice*, *Refugees*, *Love* and *Words* than young men. By comparison, young men write proportionately

more than young women about *Earth*, *Sport*, *Money* and *Guns*. Young men are writing about topics such as *War*, *Future* and *Change* more than young women. Young women are also writing about *Home*, *Bullying* and *Health* significantly more than young men. While not in scope, a detailed analysis of how they are writing about these topics by gender would provide more insight into how topics and ways of conceptualising them are gendered. Such an analysis could indicate how particular topics, such as violence, might be more usefully addressed in educational settings in order to shape positive attitudes towards ending family and domestic violence, or violence against women in particular. Further analysis might show that young men and women are using these topics to resist gendered norms, or that young people are writing about topics in ways that may fall along traditionally gendered lines.



# In their own words: writing for change

## What do young people write about – and why?

As evidenced in analysis of the corpus, young people sometimes write about reoccurring specific issues. Among the finalists in 2018, these included *Species Extinction*, *Climate Change*, *Drought*, *Women's Rights* and *Education*. We find that while young people do talk about their concerns in terms of issues, they rarely write about 'single issues'. Rather they describe the inter-relatedness of many issues they care about. For example, *Loneliness* was an issue connected to *Increasing Atomisation in Society*, as well as the possibilities for more *Community Connectedness*. In one essay, the issue of *Women's Rights* was also connected to *Australian Democratic Institutions and Cultures*, such as parliamentary parties and representation in parliaments.

Some young people explicitly aimed to write about 'meta themes', such as *Polarisation* and the importance of engaging in discussion and deliberation with people who have different ideas. Reflecting the broader corpus, interviewees confirm that the *Future* is a significant inspiration for their writing, specifically, their *Concerns* and *Hopes* for what they, societies and the planet might be like in the *Future*.

Whether overtly writing to meta-themes, essays do, almost always, write to meta-themes of *Hope*, *Change* and *Humanity*. Their positivity and belief that they as well as others in society can address the issues they identify demonstrates a high degree of belief that current versions of Australian, global and democratic societies can achieve *Planetary and Social Justice*.

Young people are motivated to write about particular topics because they want to raise awareness of issues. Oftentimes they are introduced to a topic by a parent, a teacher or they themselves note a persistent critique emerging across settings (home, school, media) and subjects. For instance, one student noted how the issue of sexism was discussed across her dinner table with family, when studying ancient Egyptian history (noting Cleopatra as notable for being one of very few celebrated female leaders in history) as well as Latin (because many texts are sexist). This student wrote about *Women's Rights* because she felt she could see *Sexism* all around her.

Sometimes students had a particular interest (e.g. *Insect Extinctions* as a metaphor for the *Climate Crisis*) or were looking for a topic that will 'set them apart in the competition', while meaningfully trying to explain a key challenge in society. For example, Lara (11, NSW) wrote about *Loneliness* because she felt it was a topic that helped to explain other *Social and Health Problems* regularly reported in the media. Similarly, Morris (17, NSW) wanted to explore why human societies are struggling to deal with different problems. His essay explored the tendency in *Politics and Culture* for *Polarised Debates*, for people with opposing views to *Avoid Debate and Discussion* with one another, and for a *Lack of Deliberation* to undermine efforts to respond to critical issues in society.

## Who can bring about change and how?

More than 'individualised' responsibility, *What Matters?* finalists provide depth to the idea of '*shared responsibility*' that underscores norms consistent with the idea of 'network governance' – where people, civil society groups, business and government all have a role in identifying and developing responses to complex social problems. While the corpus of essays indicate this is likely a common position of many entrants, the interviews with finalists clearly bear this out. The notion of shared responsibility refers to a view of political agency and responsibility whereby diverse actors and their repertoires form part of a healthy democracy. Competition finalists consistently identified:

**Individuals:** This could include themselves or other 'Ordinary People' who undertake individualised everyday actions to raise awareness, make 'micro-change' and connect with others on issues of concern. Interviewees provided many examples of these actions, from shopping with reusable bags to calling out discrimination when they witness it. Some identified writing in the *What Matters?* competition as a form of action:

*"I really think that the What Matters? is a great competition, because it shows everyone what people are thinking and what they want to change and how it can be shared through a massive community, and our voices can be heard." (Marcus, 12, NSW)*

Like Marcus, other interviewees noted the competition as a unique and rare platform for young people to Advocate on issues they care about. Others identified *Social Media* sites as a space to voice opinion or take a stand on an issue of concern. For many finalists, individuals who can make a difference also included celebrities and people in the public eye. This includes actors, business leaders and internet influencers.

While all interviewees stated that individuals were important for social and political change, they also acknowledged the relational nature of individual agency. For example, 13-year-old Leila from NSW wrote about the importance of taking your chances in life. While her entry focused on individuals in her life and how 'taking a chance' had helped them succeed in different ways, in her interview she also reflected on the relational nature of agency. She highlighted that people's capacities to take opportunities often depended on those around them and also described how, one year on from writing her *What Matters?* entry, her view on how change happens had shifted:

*"[My essay] was just about taking opportunities, but it was actually about, like trying... working hard to do what you want to do. That's basically what I said in the essay, but currently, with everything going on I think it's fair to say, we have to work together as a community to work on today's problems so that we can start thinking about tomorrow." (Leila, 13, NSW)*

This was a common view among interviewees who described the power of individual actions as anchored to the efforts of others, including different kinds of authorities such as schools, businesses and governments. In this way, most finalists reflected an 'Everyday Maker' political identity (Bang, 2005; Collin, 2009; Harris et al, 2010) believing that by taking individual actions in their daily lives to address key issues they can effect change. They also spoke about the collectivity of such individual action – what Micheletti refers to as 'individualised collective action' (Micheletti, 2003) – articulating the belief that many people doing these same things can create change. While reflecting individualised and responsibilised civic norms – taking personal responsibility for complex, large scale and structural problems such as discrimination against women – interviewees also described communitarian and participatory values, regularly speaking about the importance of community groups, service organisations and other NGOs.

#### **Community/collective action organisations/services:**

Competition finalists also articulate the importance of community organisations, networks and collective actions (such as Australian Youth Climate Coalition and School Strike for Climate) and also mobilising in groups and collectives to advocate and protest. Most referred to the student-led Global Climate Protests that started in November 2018 as inspirational and legitimate ways in which young people, with others, voice their concerns and take political action. The non-violent, international and multi-platform nature of these protests were almost always referred to as emblematic of how young people believe change can take place at the level of the community.

Interviewees almost all articulated an appreciation for civil society organisations and saw them as important to addressing the different issues they write about. Many described being invited to events organised around particular issues – such as International Women's Day, or sustainability activities – and noted them as significant for shaping their sense of connection to organisations and groups of people that are also concerned and acting on those matters of concern. These were often described as their first or only engagement with organisations or networks of other people – especially other generations – and several finalists noted how such activities showed the role that community groups and networks play in addressing issues they care about. Chloe (17, NSW) described how she had attended one such event and that the conversation and networking contributed to a broader sense of connection and empowerment to effect change:

*"We just mixed around with the rest of the people there, had a chat to everyone who was there. And it was really interesting, we just spoke a lot about their experiences, our experiences in life, I guess. And we just learnt personally about them. And it was really interesting to hear a bunch of things like that, and it's allowed us to be connected and empowered together" (Chloe, 17, NSW).*

Like Chloe, others noted that through formal and informal community engagement and service, individuals acting on different issues contributed to a broader collective effort that they view as necessary to create change.

**Governments and Politicians:** Most interviewees openly acknowledged the power, influence and importance of politicians and governments for influencing different issues. This power was not seen as absolute and it was common for young people to describe the 'current generation' of politicians as operating on 'borrowed time' insofar as they anticipated emerging generations of voters and leaders already articulating their political beliefs and expectations. Some young people recognise their growing political agency. Several mentioned approaching the age of franchise and that, they believe, as a group, young people will strongly influence elections because of their broad values and views on issues such as *Climate Change*.

**Young people:** A diverse range of views on the role young people should play in effecting change was expressed. Some described young people's role in future terms – as 'emerging leaders' or 'voters of tomorrow'. Some interviewees described the role young people play now in addressing issues in their own environments and communities as well as in society more broadly. While many interviewees identified young people as having a role to play in creating change because they believed that every person has a responsibility and ability to create change, some were more politicised about the idea that young people should have more of a role in addressing issues that affect the present and the future:

*"The people whose futures are going to be impacted upon ultimately are not... the people who are having a voice in government. Or even a voice in our democracy, a lot of us aren't eighteen to even-- Can't vote. So [my entry] talks about how the protests are the most visual demonstration of democracy and the most prominent means of making our voices heard on an issue that is paramount to what we're going to have to be facing in our adult lives." (Ellie, 17, NSW)*

## **Political norms and values**

Competition finalists reflect specific political norms and values that are echoed in the whole collection of essays:

**Participatory:** Few finalists directly advocated for children and young people to be given full political rights, but they do argue for more participatory and dialogic forms of governance. They frequently wrote about and discussed the role that all people can play, regardless of age. Many also named groups, from school and community groups, to service and political networks, that lead by example, taking a stand, speaking up and everyday actions to create the change they want to see. They rarely call for laws and regulations, even though they discuss the importance of politicians, governments and other influential leaders in being able to make decisions that affect the whole community.

**Reflexive:** It was common for finalists to refer to how things have been, what has been done, who did or did not take action, or why things have happened and how things could be different. While sometimes writing about abstract notions or other people, they routinely relate their own actions – their agency – to the issue about which they write. They demonstrate critical thinking: regarding the information they access and questioning what is going on in the world in ways that bode very well for a future healthy Australian democracy.

**Deliberative:** young people often reflect a desire for more community discussion in order to come up with responses to complex social problems:

*"I wrote about how I think polarisation is the issue where people get really entrenched in their viewpoints, and then they stop listening to each other so they can't really come up with any meaningful solutions to problems because they're just attacking each other rather than listening to each other. And I wrote about how it would be good if we could have more conversations with people we disagree with and have positive conversations that can actually achieve something." (Morris, 16, NSW)*

Like Morris, other young people highlight a lack of public discussion and the exercise of power from the top of government, or companies to be a problem and something they would like to see change. They also acknowledge that in today's world it can be a challenge – that some people might fear speaking out, for instance on social media, because they are worried about getting a negative reaction. They worry that this can lead to people not interacting with people who hold different points of view and give rise to communities and societies that become more divided, not less.

**Intergenerational:** Interviewees described a concern for the way different generations need to relate to one another to solve the problems of our time. When writing about who the *Actors of Social Change* are, they do not distinguish between different age groups, and almost always articulate that everyone has both the right and the responsibility to be part of positive change.



# Discussion – *Explaining young people's perspectives through their writing on What Matters?*

This study aimed to expand knowledge on the views and expectations of young people with regards to the issues that concern them, their communities, Australia and the world. By analysing the *What Matters?* archive of nearly 10 years of writing by young people, this research has helped to identify and explain what issues matter to students in Australia, why they are seen as important and what these young people hope will be done to address these issues.

## Topics and inter-related issue-based concerns

There are many ways young people are writing about the issues that matter to them and this analysis shows how the topics of concern are situated within and associated with higher order themes.

Our analysis shows that young people are interested in a variety of topics (*Poverty, Women's Rights, Safety, Child Rights, Environmental Degradation, War and Animals*) and connect these to broader philosophical questions of what it means to be human, to live in the world and what we want as a *Society*. This connection between topics and broader philosophical thinking indicates that young people are aware of the complexity of the world they live in. Their writing shows that they recognise the challenges of living in a connected global world. This challenge though is not one they avoid, instead we see them using issues to offer and imagine solutions – to the problems they identify and for a more just world. This indicates a need to think beyond the way young people's concerns and politics are often framed as 'issue-based'.

While many studies routinely ask young people about the issues that matter to them (eg. Mission Australia Youth Reports) the present study reveals that how young people conceptualise issues – such as international relations – matters as much as why different issues are important to them. As we have seen here, young people may be variously concerned about *Human Rights, Refugees or War* when reflecting on *Australia's Role in the World*.

Their concerns are not only personal, they are also interested in their local community and the relationship Australia as a country has with the world. They understand they are part of a global complex system in which multiple elements such as social, economic, and political variables are connected.

## Political and civic participation – taking action

Analysis shows that young people are concerned about a wide range of issues and forms of political and civic participation. Specifically, the themes of *Australia, Environment and Government* provided more detail about the ways young people advocate for specific types of action, what contributions they think they can make, and also what they are expecting and hoping for from those in positions of influence and power.

Young people are concerned with taking action on issues and this action comes in many forms. With regards to leadership, essays reflect on actions that lead to gender equality and that promote gender aware cultures. Young people write about the need to provide opportunity for women to have access to more leadership roles in business and government. Young people call for actions to empower women such as providing equal opportunities, addressing the gender pay gap and fighting for *Women's Rights* across the globe.

Young people also write about the need for global actions in response to issues such as *Climate Change* and the *Displacement of People*. Leaders are expected to take action that have global effects. Discourses about global action often link action with the need to care for something other than oneself and are linked to the need to care. Good leaders are seen as those who care about the plight of others, such as Malala Yousafzai and her work on women and children's rights. Good leadership is seen to come from countries that are perceived to be helping to solve the crisis of global displacement of peoples such as Sweden and Germany.

Actions also include individual activities aimed at reducing waste, preventing overuse of resources and consuming less. These individual actions are something all school age groups write about. Actions are about raising awareness, advocating for causes, campaigning, volunteering, talking to peers and family, supporting peers and promoting dialogue between each other. Action is also about working with local communities on local issues, addressing pollution in the local river and waterways, working with local sporting clubs to help those in need, or attending a local clean up Australia day working bee.

Responsibility, active citizenship and the way nations should enact democratic responsibilities and norms all feature in the concerns young people have written about. Our analysis of *What Matters?* entries also refutes common perceptions that young people are uninterested in the procedural aspects of democracy. Our findings show that they are informed and write about specific and contemporary issues and events in relation to actors and institutions of government. However, they also use their writing to engage with current world events, showing that political participation can happen through meaningful reflection on these events.

# Emerging civic values and norms among young Australians

In our analysis young people's writing reveals much about the developing political subjectivities of young people as they engage with and question the world around them. Specifically, a range of civic values and norms appear to be quite common and significant for the ways in which young people identify and are moved to care about issues, and propose action that can positively shape the kind of society and world they want to live in.

## 1. Young people value familial, peer and community relationships the most.

Across all year groups, young people are concerned with their day to day lives and how the people around them feel and live, though this topic is most prevalent among students in years 5 – 8. Students write about the family members who matter to them, what good friendships are and feelings like happiness and love. Homework, school, friends, family and pets also matter.

**2. Young people reflect a 'global citizen' sensibility.** They understand that they live in a global community and they are concerned about many issues and problems that affect others and their relationship to these issues. Initial analysis of main themes highlights young people's awareness of global issues. These include *Human and Child Rights*, *Environmental and Climate Concerns*, *War, Security*, and *Migration*.

**3. Young people are interested in the future of the world around them, and the challenge to realise the actions needed to create a better society.** How they frame issues and actions, who they address and what solutions they propose are all important areas for future analysis.

**4. Young people advocate caring for those less fortunate than themselves.** Young people consistently write about the social welfare of others. Essays concerned with *Poverty*, *Homelessness*, *Education* are evident across all age groups.

**5. Leaders and leadership are central to what young people write about.** Consistently young people write about the need for action on the issues they care about. They see a relationship between political action and leadership that reflects a horizontal notion of leaders as well as the enduring power of those with institutional forms of power.

**6. Young people are writing about working together and collective responsibility.** Research shows that young people do not adhere to the stereotypical idea of apathetic and disinterested political citizens. In their essays, young people are writing about how they can work with others, how people can come together to work towards making a difference and how this reflects our shared responsibility – and potential – for change.

**7. The Environment matters and is a central concern to most young people.** Our initial analysis shows that a large number of essays are concerned with environmental issues. This needs to be explored further to ascertain how young people relate to different discourses of *Wilderness*, *Protection*, *Sustainability* and *Climate Change*. These issues have changed over time and future analysis will seek to map how young people are writing about the *Environment* over time and in relation to changing policy and popular discourse.



# Recommendations

While young people under the age of 18 represent about 30% of the Australian population, they are rarely included as active participants and key constituents of Australian democracy. At best they are positioned as future citizens and citizens-in-training. Consequently, young Australians are grossly underrepresented in social and political research on public policy, political and civic engagement and democratic theory in general. Children and young people are also disenfranchised from political and policy processes due to their relative lack of representation and rights to participate in institutional political processes such as elections. While many young people today are engaged with politics – even leading movements such as the Global Climate Strikes – a 2019 Report Card on Children's Rights in Australia found that Australians under the age of 18 feel they have no voice in society (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019).

Yet the findings we have reported clearly demonstrate that with a platform on which to 'speak' – such as the Whitlam Institute's *What Matters?* Writing competition – young people express opinions on very many social and political issues that affect them, their communities, Australia and the world. They engage carefully with the subjects of their writing and have views on what could be done to address the problems and concerns they identify. In this project we have developed a novel methodological approach to studying a large corpus of writing by young people and the analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of their concerns, how they view different issues, and the political actors and responses they believe are necessary for social change.

This research was inspired by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: that young people should be involved in decisions that affect them. We wanted to better understand what young people are saying when they 'speak' from their own contexts and communities. What we have found is that young people themselves are asking to be heard through the writing they submit to the *What Matters?* competition. In this spirit, we offer the following recommendations arising from the findings of this research which we hope will take the discussion forward:

**Recommendation 1. That political parties, politicians, policy makers and educators enhance processes for hearing and responding to children and young people's perspectives in Australian democracy.**

Our analysis confirms that many young people are interested in diverse issues, institutional systems and democratic processes and that they are a source of ideas and energy for how Australia can meet current and future challenges. In their writing, they reflect a participatory and reflexive orientation – emphasising the importance of being a part of local, national and international responses to different problems. Engaging in new and meaningful ways with Australia's youngest residents and citizens is likely to be the best way to help foster the value of civic and political engagement for future generations. Specific mechanisms such as a voice to parliament would help foster trust in governments and politicians and respond to the desire of many young people to have a say on the way Australia is governed.

**Recommendation 2. Decision makers and educators should adopt a rights-based approach recognising and valuing young people's participation in democratic processes.**

Our analysis indicates that this is a generation with a strong set of emerging ethical and moral commitments including care, equality and justice. Enhancing understanding and appreciation of what these values mean for emergent political identities, as well as how and why they have become so meaningful to young people, will be important for fostering and explaining young people's civic and political practices into the future.

**Recommendation 3. Educators should consider how classroom teaching and school student leadership programs contribute to gendered ideas about who should participate and what issues should matter to young people.**

The 2018 data suggests that the majority of *What Matters?* entrants are young women and that the ways students are writing about topics is gendered along traditional male/female interest norms. While young people are both resisting and reproducing gendered norms through their writing, more research is needed into the way young people think and write about topics in gendered ways, and how this can be addressed. Further research is needed to understand why young women are more likely to be writing about *Love, Equality, Happiness* and *Bodies* whilst young males are more likely to be writing about *Guns, War, Future and Change*. Addressing the gendering of politics through civics education could make a valued contribution to addressing the gross gender imbalance in political representation in democracy more broadly.

**Recommendation 4. As a matter of priority, civil society organisations, political parties, educators and policy makers should develop participatory, deliberative, and intergenerational approaches to democratic engagement, civics education and policy making that are co-created with young people.**

Essays show that young people increasingly reflect participatory citizenship norms – valuing direct involvement, deliberation and contestation among diverse members of society to identify and address shared problems. Participatory approaches to teaching civics could leverage these norms as well as meaningful opportunity structures for youth participation in Australian democracy and institutions – from schools, to local councils to the Federal Government. This means involving young people in agenda-setting processes as well as problem-solving and decision-making on important issues that impact the way we live in Australia and the world.

**Recommendation 5. Researchers and those who commission research must work directly with young people to explore the value of research and the role it can play in amplifying youth voice and agency.**

Young people already contribute their concerns, ideas and hopes for our shared future in writing, videos, art and other forms of expression. Future research that aims to better 'hear' what young people are already saying would be greatly enhanced by improving the participatory possibilities for young people themselves to access, analyse and wield this 'data'. Developing digital, creative and distributed options for collaborative corpus analysis could dramatically advance knowledge of the complexity and value of young people's views on pressing challenges we face as communities and societies.



EQUALITY

# References

- Australian Human Rights Commission. (2019) *Children's Rights in Australia: a scorecard*. Australian Human Rights Commission. <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/childrens-rights/publications/childrens-rights-australia-scorecard>
- Bang, H. (2005), 'Among Everyday Makers and Expert Citizens', in J Newman (ed), *Remaking Governance: Peoples, Politics and the Public Sphere*, pp. 159-78. Policy Press, Bristol.
- Bennett, L.W. (2003). Communicating Global Activism, *Information, Communication and Society*, 6, 143–168.
- Bennett, L.W. (2008). Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age. In L.W. Bennett (Ed.), *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Bessant, J. (2014). *Democracy Bytes: New Media, New Politics and Generational Change*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brooker, R. (2011). *Youth federal election voting intentions: a statistical and graphical analysis of the Newspoll Quarterly Data 1996-2010*. Whitlam Institute, Western Sydney University, Sydney.
- Carlisle, E., Fildes, J., Hall, S., Perrens, B., Perdriau, A., & Plummer, J. (2019). Youth Survey Report 2019, Sydney, NSW: Mission Australia.
- Coleman, S., & Rowe, C. (2005). *Remixing Citizenship: Democracy and Young People's Use of the Internet*. Carnegie Young People Initiative, London, United Kingdom. <http://www.carnegiekut.org.uk/getattachment/0fb5a5f-22b9-429a-9aab-db088e3b5334/Remixing-Citizenship> <https://www.carnegiekut.org.uk/publications/remixing-citizenship-democracy-and-young-peoples-use-of-the-internet/>.
- Collin, P. (2008). *Young people imagining a new democracy: literature review*. The Whitlam Institute, Western Sydney University, Sydney.
- (2009), *The Making of Good Citizens: Participation policies, the internet and youth political identities in Australia and the United Kingdom*, PhD Thesis, University of Sydney.
- (2015) *Young citizens and political participation in a digital society: addressing the democratic disconnect*. New York: Palgrave McMillan.
- Collin, P., & McCormack, J. (2019) Young people and politics. In P.J. Chen, N. Barry, J.R. Butcher, D. Clune, I. Cook, A. Garnier, Y. Haigh, S.C. Motta & M. Taflaga (Eds). *Australian Politics and Policy* (pp.487-500)., Sydney, N.S.W: Sydney University Press.
- Collin, P. & McCormack, J. (2020). Young People and Australian Democracy: A Literature Review. Sydney: Whitlam Institute.
- Gurney, M. (2017). Andrew Bolt and the discourse of 'scepticism' in the Australian climate change debate: A 'distant reading' approach using Leximancer. *Global Media Journal: Australian Edition*, 11(2).
- Fyfe, I., & Wyn, J. (2007). Young activists making news: the role of the media in youth political and civic engagement. In K. Edwards, M. Print & L. Saha (Eds.), *Youth and political participation* (113-132). Rotterdam: Sense.
- Harris, A., Wyn, J., & Younes, S. (2007). Young people and citizenship: an everyday perspective, *Youth Studies Australia*, 26(3), -27.
- Harris, A., Wyn, J., & Younes, S. (2010). Beyond Apathetic or Activist Youth: 'Ordinary' Young People and Contemporary Forms of Participation. *Young*, 18, 9–32.
- Hay, C. (2007). *Why we hate politics*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Hodge, B., & Matthews, I. (2011). New media for old bottles: Linear thinking and the 2010 Australian election. *Communication, Politics & Culture*, 44(2), 95-111.
- Lister, R., Smith, N., Middleton, S., & Cox, L. (2003). *Young People Talk about Citizenship: Empirical Perspectives on Theoretical and Political Debates*, Citizenship Studies, 7, 235–253.
- Manning, N. (Ed.) (2015). *Political (dis)engagement: the changing nature of the 'Political'*. The Policy Press, Bristol.
- Martin, AJ. (2012). *Young People and Politics: Political Engagement in the Anglo- American Democracies*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Marsh, D., O'Toole, T. & Jones, S. (2007). *Young People and Politics in the UK: Apathy or Alienation?* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Micheletti, M. (2003). *Political virtue and shopping: Individuals, consumerism and collective action*, Palgrave, Basingstoke.
- McAllister, I., & Snagovsky, F. (2018). *Explaining voting in the 2017 Australian same-sex marriage plebiscite*, Australian Journal of Political Science, 53(4), 409-427.
- Norris, P. (2002). *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norris, P. (2003). Young People and Political Activism: From the Politics of Loyalties to the Politics of Choice? Council of Europe Symposium: 'Young People and Democratic Institutions: From Disillusionment to Participation'. Strasbourg: J.F Kennedy School of Government, 31.
- Notley, T., & Dezuanni, M. (2019). Advancing children's news media literacy: learning from the practices and experiences of young Australians, *Media, Culture and Society*, 4(5), 689-707.
- Pickard, S. (2017). 'Momentum and the Movementist 'Corbynistas': Young People Regenerating Politics in Britain', in S Pickard and J Bessant (eds), *Young People Re-Generating Politics in Times of Crises*, pp. 115–137, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Pickard, S. (2019). *Politics, protest and young people: Political participation and dissent in 21st century Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pirie M., & Worcester, R.M. (2000). *The Big Turn-off: Attitudes of Young People to Government, Citizenship and Community*. London: Adam Smith Institute.

Pratchett, L. (1999). "Introduction: Defining democratic renewal" in *Local Government Studies* 25:4, p.1 – 18.

Sloam, J., & Henn, M. (2019). *Youthquake: the rise of young cosmopolitans in Britain*, Open Access: Palgrave Macmillan.

Smith, N., Lister, R., Middleton, S., & Cox, L. (2005). Young People as Real Citizens: Towards an Inclusionary Understanding of Citizenship. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 8, 425–443.

Vromen, A. (2003). 'People Try to Put Us Down...': Participatory citizenship of 'generation X', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 38, 79–99.

(2008). Building virtual spaces: Young People, Participation and the Internet, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 43, 79–97.

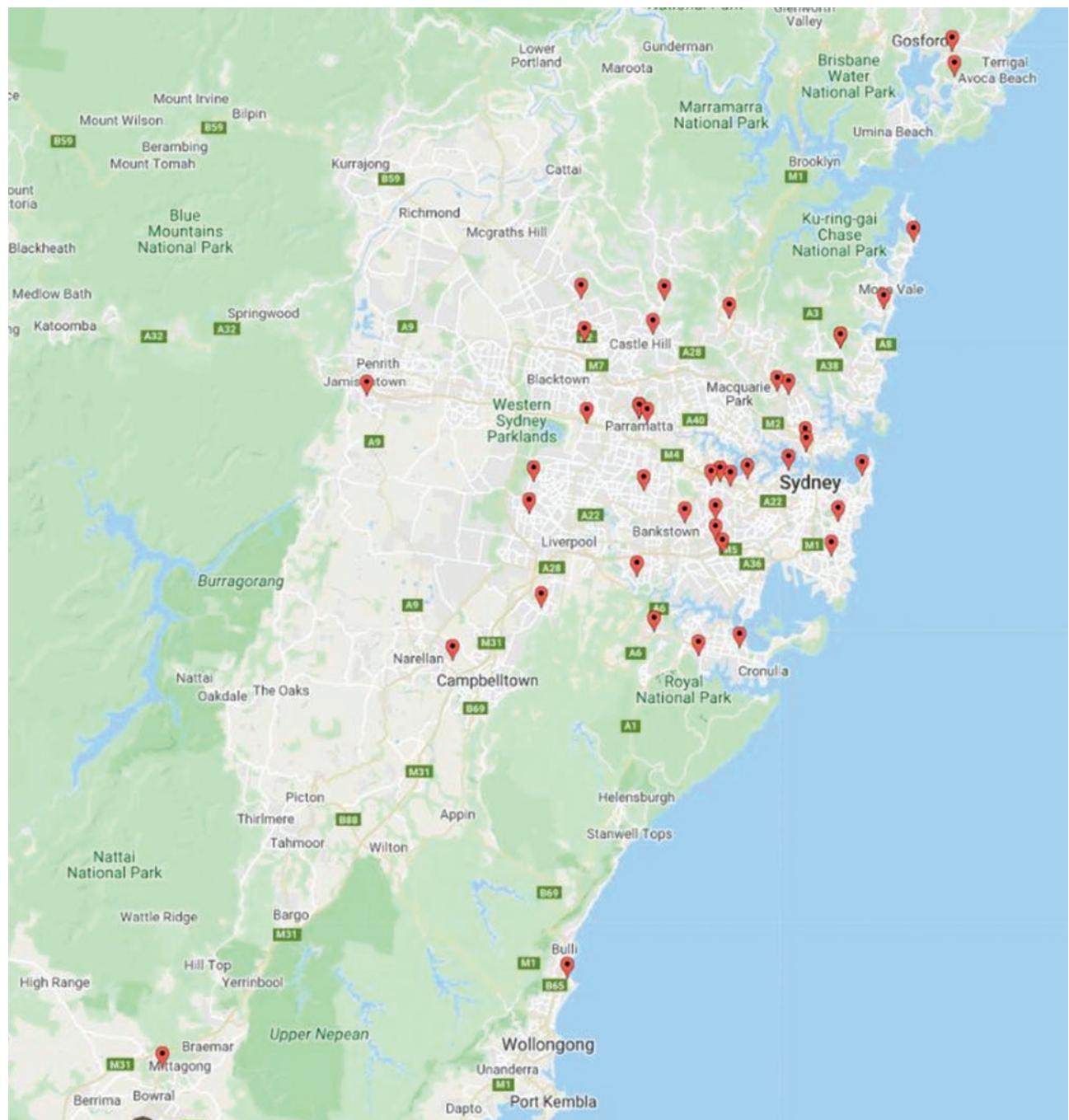
(2016). *Digital Citizenship and Political Engagement: The Challenge from Online Campaigning and Advocacy Organisations*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Vromen, A et al., (2015). Young people, social media and connective action: from organisational maintenance to everyday political talk. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(1), 80 – 100.

Woodman, D., & Wyn, J. (2015). Class, gender and generation matter: Using the concept of social generation to study inequality and social change. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(10), 1402-1410.

# Appendix

## Appendix A: Location of top 50 number of entrants by school in 2018



## Appendix B:

### Interviews with *What Matters?* competition finalists

*What Matters?* Writing competition finalists from 2016-2019 were invited by email to participate and twelve interviews were conducted. Interview demographics:

PSEUDONYM	AGE	SCHOOL LOCATION	COUNTRY OF BIRTH	PARENTS' COUNTRY OF BIRTH	LANGUAGE/S SPOKEN	ATSI	GENDER
Jessica	12	Sydney	Australia	Australia	English	n	f
Harry	15	Tasmania regional	Australia	Australia	English	n	m
Marcus	12	Sydney	Australia	Australia	Croatian	n	m
Ellie	18	NSW regional	England	Australia and Canada	English	n	f
Elias	11	Sydney	Sydney	Australia	English	y	-
Leila	13	NSW regional	Saudi Arabia	Australia	English	n	f
Chloe	17	Sydney	Australia	Australia	English	n	f
Angelo	17	Sydney	Australia	Australia and NZ	English	n	m
Morris	16	NSW regional	Australia	Australia	English	n	m
Aleshka	18	Sydney	Australia	India	Punjabi	n	f
Eve	15	Sydney	Brazil	Brazil	Portuguese	n	f
Manhar	12	Sydney	NZ	Egypt; Australia	Arabic	n	f

Interviews went for around 30 minutes each and were conducted via telephone. The interviewer spoke privately to eleven interviewees and in one interview the participant used loudspeaker with their Mother present. The interviews were semi-structured with demographic information collected first, followed by open ended questions on the following themes:

1. How did you become interested in this topic?
2. Who or what has helped you learn about/understand the topic?
3. Are there other things you've done or groups you've been involved in to try and make a difference on this issue? What was your experience / why not?
4. Why did you enter the *What Matters?* writing competition?
5. What do you want to see happen in relation to this issue?
6. Who do you think can bring about this change?
7. What role do you think young people can play in achieving this change?
8. What are the three other issues that are most significant for either you, your community or Australia?

## Appendix C: Spread of entries with percentages via gender and school year group 2018

Table X: Spread of entries by gender and year level in 2018

YEAR	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	TOTAL
<b>Female</b>	213 (63%)	494 (68%)	353 (68%)	371 (69%)	470 (52%)	260 (66%)	187 (70%)	34 (79%)	2382 (64%)
<b>Male</b>	118 (35%)	221 (30%)	162 (31%)	161 (30%)	408 (45%)	126 (32%)	76 (28%)	9 (20%)	1281 35%
<b>(blank)</b>	3 .9%)	4 .5%)	4 .7%)	2 .4%)	10 (1.2%)	5 (1.3%)	1 (.4%)		29 (1%)
<b>Total</b>	334	719	519	534	888	391	264	43	3692 (100%)

## Appendix D: Normalisation of data and gender ratios for topics

To determine the percentage of males and females writing about each topic, we sorted keywords by gender. To further analyse this data, we normalised it, accounting for the fact that 65% of all entries were submitted by females and 35% by males. To assess topic popularity by gender, the gender ratio for submissions related to a topic were compared against the overall gender ratio for all submissions, to calculate a relative gender prevalence by percentage.

For example, Table 11 shows the overall gender ratio and the gender ratio for topics *Pollution* and *Animals*. Based on the percentage of submissions, *Pollution* would appear a more popular topic among females than males; however, when adjusting for the skew in overall submissions, *Pollution* is equally popular among males and females, as evidenced by the relative gender prevalence scores of 1.0.

Table 11: Table showing the overall gender ratio of Male 35% and Female 65% for topics *Pollution* and *Animals*

METRIC	MALE	FEMALE
% of Overall submissions	35%	65%
% of Pollution submissions	35%	65%
Pollution – relative gender prevalence	1.0	1.0
% of Animal submissions	22%	78%
Animal – relative gender prevalence	0.63	1.2

Another way to represent this data is seen in Table 12 and 13. Here the top 50 topics are presented. The percentage of females and males writing about these topics is also presented. For example, in table 12 we see that 4.92% percent of females wrote about *Women* and 2.73% of females wrote about *Refugees*. Table 12 shows the percentage of males writing about *War* is 4.6% and *Future* is 3.8%. Both tables show the percentage of each gender and the percentage that each gender is more likely to write about each topic. For example, males are 414% more likely to write about *Sport* while females are 901% more likely to write about *Children*.

**Table 12: Table showing the topics via gender and the percentage a gender is more likely to be writing about a topic**

TOPICS	FEMALE	MALE	MORE LIKELY	TOPICS	FEMALE	MALE	MORE LIKELY
women	4.92%	0.36%	1251%	earth	2.2%	0.4%	499%
children	1.82%	0.18%	901%	sport	3.3%	0.6%	414%
happiness	1.55%	0.18%	751%	money	1.5%	0.4%	300%
voice	1.28%	0.18%	601%	things	1.5%	0.5%	220%
words	1.19%	0.18%	551%	gun	2.7%	1.0%	172%
refugees	2.73%	0.91%	200%	music	2.2%	1.0%	118%
freedom	1.46%	0.55%	167%	people	2.6%	1.3%	100%
equality	4.19%	2.00%	109%	man	2.4%	1.2%	100%
love	2.28%	1.09%	109%	rights	1.1%	0.5%	100%
animal	7.57%	4.19%	81%	war	4.6%	2.6%	78%
child	2.55%	1.46%	75%	future	3.8%	2.2%	75%
society	1.28%	0.73%	75%	water	1.8%	1.1%	67%
home	3.65%	2.37%	54%	change	3.5%	2.1%	65%
body	0.82%	0.55%	50%	family	5.6%	3.5%	63%
environment	1.91%	1.28%	50%	friends	2.2%	1.4%	60%
hope	1.00%	0.73%	38%	end	1.8%	1.2%	54%
bullying	5.29%	4.01%	32%	racism	2.0%	1.4%	47%
australia	2.83%	2.19%	29%	peace	1.3%	0.9%	40%
lives	1.37%	1.09%	25%	school	1.5%	1.1%	33%
health	1.82%	1.46%	25%	ocean	1.6%	1.3%	28%
really	0.82%	0.73%	13%	poverty	2.7%	2.2%	25%
dreams	0.82%	0.73%	13%	education	4.4%	3.6%	20%
media	1.00%	0.91%	10%	stop	2.6%	2.2%	17%
				life	4.92%	4.38%	12%
				human	1.09%	1.00%	9%
				pollution	2.55%	2.37%	8%
				world	4.74%	4.65%	2%





# Whitlam Institute

WITHIN WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

Female Orphan School  
Western Sydney University Parramatta campus  
Cnr James Ruse Drive & Victoria Road Rydalmere NSW 2116  
Locked Bag 1797 Penrith NSW Australia 2751  
T+ 61 2 9685 9210 E [info@whitlam.org](mailto:info@whitlam.org)  
[whitlam.org](http://whitlam.org)

**WESTERN SYDNEY**  
UNIVERSITY

